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For the **Crown** of our life as it closes
Is darkness, the fruit thereof dust;
No **Thorns** go as deep as a rose's,
And love is more cruel than lust.

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Dedication

For My Dear Wife
Teresa Ajab

Our Dear Daughter
Njiondock Laura
and

Our Dear Sons
Ajabenyang Stephen & Asongu Edward

Your Love Was Always My Inspiration

For The Lebialem Genuine Intellectual:
You Owe It to The World
To Give The Best That Is In You
For the Betterment of Mankind

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Chapter One

ACHIEBEFUO ROSE, coughed and cleared his throat to talk, but words stuck in his throat. He felt as though the entire world had come to a standstill. His heart beat so loud that he thought he could never speak above the loudness. The words Ngobefuo had just uttered seemed to pluck his ears and he could not hear anything else.

Akeukeuor, the god of gods of the tribe of Nkokonoko Small Monje had been cut off, stolen and sold to a white man. And all the fingers of the tribe were pointing at him.

Yes, he told himself, Ngobefuo was insulting him directly. He was really spitting in his face, and without caring about it. He, Achiebefuo, was also an arm of the tribe. He would not sink under a kinsman's insults like a woman. No, he wouldn't. He must spit back in his face too.

Eventually, the puzzle of that morning began to fall in place. He got that feeling that there was something seriously wrong because Ngobefuo had refused to talk to him. When he entered Ngobefuo's hut the latter had not invited the young man present to fetch a stool for him to sit on. He had merely pointed at the stool in the far corner, implying that he, Achiebefuo, ought to fetch it himself. Then after he, Achiebefuo had actually gone for the stool, Ngobefuo had pointed to a spot away from him where he wanted him to sit. This he did with the left hand!

Achiebefuo did not utter a word disapproving of this strange attitude towards him. He was comfortably seated and by way of gauging the extent of Ngobefuo's grievances against him, he said:

"My first man, I was here last night and also earlier this morning."

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There was silence, then he continued:

"The children told me that you did not want to see me. Were they talking the truth, my first man?"

Ngobefuo looked across at him, then looked away again. His lips pouted contemptuously. He had been smoking his pipe when Achiebefuo came in. He withdrew the pipe from his mouth and clasped it with both hands between his legs. He then spoke as though his kinsman had not said anything at all.

"Achiebefuo, a lot of things have happened in this tribe of Nkokonoko Small Monje."

Achiebefuo took a mental note of the fact that Ngobefuo had ignored his question, but he chose to show no indignation. He jerked to the edge of the stool and stared at Ngobefuo, mystified.

"One very serious thing has happened in this tribe," Ngobefuo went on.

"And what is that, my first man?" Achiebefuo asked.

Ngobefuo did not answer directly. Instead he went on to enquire:

"Achiebefuo, is there anything in this tribe of ours which is new to you?"

Achiebefuo was silent. Why should such a question be thrown at him, he pondered. Ngobefuo went on anyway:

"Is there anything about me, sitting here before you, which you do not know?"

Achiebefuo still did not answer. He gazed at Ngobefuo's face, the worry lines on his forehead narrowed until his unusually thick brows almost met. He swallowed loudly. A sudden oppressive silence ensued, like the lull before an on-coming storm. The two friends and help-mates stared fixedly into each other's eyes and for the first time they saw not love and cooperation but deep suspicion. Achiebefuo broke the silence.

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"My first man," he began, "if you want us to talk like one brother to another in this house, please, let me see your heart."

"Achiebefuo, I will only tell you the things you know already, those things you thought we would never find out."

"And they are what things, my first man ?"

"***Akeukeuor***, the god of gods of the tribe of Nkokonoko Small Monje has been cut off, stolen and sold to a white man. And all the fingers of this tribe are pointing at you."

The reply had jarred Achiebefuo's senses to smithereens. He swore to himself, that infant sitting outside there must know, must hear, must tell them that ask, that Achiebefuo had answered the call to battle. He would answer Ngobefuo like one mad man to another. But no. He must not behave so rashly. Ngobefuo might have talked in jest. And if he said something nasty to him as a result, would he not ask, "Achiebefuo, do you not know when a man is joking? Do you think I could ever have said that to you seriously? It only shows how little you know me." Then who would have lost? Whose shame would that have been?

He stretched his hands and cracked his knuckles. Why deceive himself? He had known Ngobefuo for years. He never joked, never teased anybody and never laughed but to mock a situation. The ***Akeukeuor*** was not a subject he conversed about so freely. Ngobefuo, therefore, meant everything, he had talked in earnest and so it would be wrong on his part to regard the revelation as a joke. He gathered the folds of his sprawling loincloth, put them between his skinny laps and braced himself up. Raising his head which he supported under his chin with his right hand and with the right elbow resting on his knee he addressed Ngobefuo with obvious offended dignity:

"You say ***Akeukeuor*** has been stolen, my first man?"

Ngobefuo ran his tongue over his dried lips and said:

"It is stolen."

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"And you say all fingers are pointing at me, my first man?"

"I will not turn it into a song," Ngobefuo said and looked away spitefully.

Achiebefuo's feet were trembling and with arms now folded, he peered into Ngobefuo's eyes and asked:

"My first man, fingers are pointing at Achiebefuo. Yes, fingers of people who may not know me are pointing at me. But as somebody who knows me very well, where is your own finger pointing?"

"I said *all* fingers are pointing at Achiebefuo. If my own was pointing at some other person I should have said so. I am not talking with water in my mouth."

Achiebefuo absorbed this next insult and sank back onto his stool. After a few seconds he rose again and said:

"My first man, let us not be mad in the day time like this. I do not want to find out whether ***Akeukeuor*** has been stolen or not..."

"It is stolen..."

"Please let me talk. I believe you, not because you cannot tell a lie, but because I know you well. On the other hand you cannot say certain things about me, and I want to tell you that you are not talking like somebody who knows me at all."

"Achiebefuo, don't worry yourself, I am talking like somebody who knows you very well. And right now I am talking like somebody who fears you."

Achiebefuo broke out into a long hollow, grating and mirthless laughter "Uuuhhuu-kikikiki-hahahaha-kikikiki..." Then he stopped as abruptly as he had started, shot his right hand at Ngobefuo and told him:

"It is really true that you fear me now. ***Akeukeuor*** is stolen, the god of our gods. My first man hears of it and immediately refuses to see me or talk to me. Why, because he knows that there never can be anybody in the tribe capable of doing such a thing except Achiebefuo. Sorry.

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Then, the first time I am hearing about it is when I am called upon to defend myself. Me, Achiebefuo!"

He sat down and then lowering his voice almost to a whisper began:

"My first man, if such a thing appeared to me in a dream about you, I would be afraid even to mention the dream to you. The reason being that I know you. The reason being that I trust you. The reason being that we cannot forget that this tribe of Nkokonoko Small Monje rests on our shoulders. Fuo-Ndee left it in our hands, you and I, Ngobefuo and Achiebefuo. Others are merely our helpers. And here I am, defending myself before you in a matter about the tribe we two were supposed to protect.

"What you want me to believe is that Fuo-ndee made a mistake to have chosen me amongst so many to work with you, to protect the ways and heritage of this tribe of ours. What you want me to believe by this also is that the god who guided Fuo-ndee's hands into choosing me to work with you for the good of his tribe made a big mistake. My first man, you should know that you made an even greater mistake than all of them. You should never have allowed things to go this far. As a man who is so wise, so upright and so far-seeing, you should never have agreed to work with a thief."

Ngobefuo raised his eyes with a quizzical look on his face.

"Yes," Achiebefuo nodded. "That is the type of person you have conceived me to be in your heart for the past fifty years."

He heaved a heavy sigh and asked again:

"What kind of man did you say you know me to be, my first man?".

"A carver," Ngobefuo responded firmly. "I know Achiebefuo to be a good carver."

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Achiebefuo felt thick bile of indignation rise from the pit of his stomach to his throat. He constricted the muscles of his throat and forced back that suffocating lump of anger.

"Have I never meant anything to this tribe and to you than a carver?" he enquired furiously. "Was I chosen to work with you because I was a carver?"

The declaration that Ngobefuo had known Achiebefuo only as a carver still did not register anything in Achiebefuo's mind. It did not make him suspect that he was a dupe in some mischief. If anything, he thought that somebody down the coast might have seen the statue which the D.O. had requested to be carved for him. It had been so faithfully copied. The information must have been passed on to Ngobefuo, who in turn must have concluded that Achiebefuo had stolen the god of their land and had sold it.

On his part, Ngobefuo did not allow his knowledge of Achiebefuo or the extent to which the latter looked embarrassed and offended to colour the facts of the situation which had been thoroughly investigated. He told his kinsman very calmly:

"Achiebefuo, I do not deny that I had known you for long. But what I know about you now is beyond what I could ever have imagined you to be."

"What do you know about me now, my first man?"

"That you have a hangman's blood in your veins. I am not the one to ask you where you got the money you were spitting out in public in Sowa, the money you were giving out to the Chief when we were here chaffing, eating dried catarrh from our nostrils. That was unlike the Achiebefuo I had always known, the Achiebefuo into whose hands and mine the protection of the tribe was entusted."

He paused for a long time and said, rising:

"If you pretend not to understand what I am talking about come and refresh your eyes with the thorn in my heart - your handiwork which you seem now to forget."

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Stunned by the force of the accusation and the certainty with which it was made, Achiebefuo staggered to his feet and followed Ngobefuo, his feet shaking at every pace like those of a man crossing a hammock. They passed through the palace, entered the holy grove and went on until they reached the holy shrine. Beckongncho, the man who had brought the news of the stolen statue, and whose investigations had sparked off the wave of accusations, was following them, but from a distance.

It was the custom that any entrance into the holy grove and shrine must be preceded by the dancing forward and backward of two masquerades, each holding a flaming torch, amidst other formalities. But Ngobefuo, to Achiebefuo's astonishment, ignored all ceremony and virtually strolled into the place, a strong indication that something unusual had happened. Without the solemnity and reverence which for ages had always bespoken the total helplessness of a mortal in the presence of that deity, Ngobefuo crossed the River of Forgetfulness, walked up to their god and wrenched off the thick black cloth which had always covered it. As he did this he turned sharply to Achiebefuo and with a cadence in his voice asked:

"Is this our god, Achiebefuo? Tell me that!"

Achiebefuo felt like urinating where he stood, his stomach ached instantly so that he also felt a strong urge to go to stool, he felt like vomiting, like sneezing, like crying, like dashing his head against the foot of the statue and dying at once.

No, the statue that stood there was not their god, it was not ***Akeukeuor***! Was that not the same statue he had carved for the D.O.? Had the D.O. not told him that it had been sent to a far off country? How then had it managed to find its way back into the shrine to stand in the place of ***Akeukeuor***? Yes, Ngobefuo was right to excrete in his mouth, he told himself.

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"Is that our god?" Ngobefuo shouted.

Achiebefuo opened his mouth to speak but he could not move his tongue. He stood looking down at his own feet like a guilty infant who surrenders himself to his father, knowing that he must be punished, knowing that there was no point in escaping.

"Is that not something made by a carver?"

"It is, my first man," Achiebefuo answered from somewhere down his throat.

"Achiebefuo, tell me, who carved it?"

"I did, my first man." In his benumbing mind Achiebefuo thought that Ngobefuo would ask him why he did it. To which he would have explained:

"My first man Goment*, came to me one day last year and asked me if I could carve for him a replica of

Akeukeuor. He said he wanted to take it to a Show in the white man's country. I told him that I could do it. He promised to give me fifty thousand francs, and told me that I would do the work only in his storeroom, that if I let anybody know what I was doing in his place he would divide the money he was to give me among as many people as knew about it. I did the work and I did not tell anybody. But I thought that by using the money to save the Chief's face, I was putting it into common use. How it happened again that he brought it here and cut away ***Akeukeuor*** and put the statue in its place, I do not know, and I can swear by *Ku-ngang* that I am innocent."

That would have been the truth, but not the whole truth. The whole truth lay in the fateful visit Nicholas Virchow, a certain white man, had paid to Nkokonoko Small Monje. He had come all the way from Texas to see and perhaps take some photographs of that very famous statue he had so often heard about in Texas.

** A mispronunciation of the word Government. In this context, it denotes a reference to the District Officer (D.O.)*

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He had come as a tourist and, as the regulations required he had first presented himself before the D.O. There he had disclosed the purpose of his visit. The D.O. learned for the first time that there was a craze for antiquities from Africa in the United States and Europe. The D.O. had been excited by the news. Now instead of continuing to the palace to see the statue as Virchow had said, the D.O. had suggested that they drive to his residence. That night the tourist had dined with the D.O. and his family. As they ate and drank, Virchow had made a seemingly casual and insignificant observation that a statue of the size of ***Akeukeuor*** could fetch Small Monje millions in the United States, if the people ever thought of selling it. [He would say later that the expression *millions* had been intended as a metaphor, implying simply that it could cost quite much].

Whether this statement was a result of a premeditated plan which had necessitated the visit in the first place, or was meant to be taken as a compliment to the cultural heritage of the people of Small Monje, it is hard to say. But it had struck the D.O. at a point of keenest interest - money. The readiness, however, with which Virchow had agreed to pay for the statue when the D.O. made him believe that it was possible to convince the people to sell the antiquity, seemed to indicate that he too must have been thinking of possessing such a thing before he left the United States.

When it came to the money actually changing hands it did not cost millions as Virchow had intimated. In fact, it was to cost only a few hundred thousands - four hundred thousand francs. The D.O. did not look too disappointed. He had only one suggestion: It was not going to be a direct deal. He knew that the circumstances of the Chief were such that he could easily be convinced to work with them. He felt too that the presence of the white man could create some suspicion which would ruin the whole deal. He decided therefore that Virchow would keep out of the scene completely.

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But he gave Virchow a different reason. He told him that although the natives had expressed the desire to sell the statue, they had made it plain to him that it must be sold only to a black man. He had a personality which could put an air of candour over the most blatant lies, and make him sound like a saint. This trait he had long recognized himself and always exploited it to the fullest advantage.

Virchow was to return to the coast immediately to expect the statue. But first he was to give an advance payment of two hundred thousand francs after a tacit written agreement had been made between the two. The rest of the money was to be paid upon receipt of the statue at the coast.

The D.O. knew that Achiebefuo was a carver of mortars, wooden spoons, drums and masks which he sold in the markets. On one of the market days he met Achiebefuo on his way to the market, bought everything he was taking to the market and then asked Achiebefuo to come with him to his house for an assignment. Within two weeks Achiebefuo had completed a huge statue which the D.O. painted black, the colour of the god of Small Monje, as described by Achiebefuo to him.

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The Chief was the D.O.'s next target. In a private interview - Satan's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden could not have been better - he talked to the Chief about the latter's plight, his abject poverty and 'the danger,' as he put it, 'of falling from grace to grass through no fault of his.' At this the Chief told him:

"Whatever suffering I am undergoing it is you and the Government who have caused it. It could not have been like this if I was still earning a salary."

"Do not think that the Government is so wicked and short-sighted," the D.O. told him. "If you are suffering, that is entirely your fault. The Government has always had the interest of the Chiefs at heart. We still need them now just as we need oxygen. The point that you must understand here is that before the Government ever passed that decree and make it a law, it had taken into its wise consideration the irrefutable fact that there were means within reach of the affected Chiefs, which can always sustain them.'

"Like what, sir?" the Chief asked him.

''I will explain myself,'' the D.O. said. ''We, the Government, have taken cognizance of the fact that the paramount Chiefs like yourself rule over traditional societies. It therefore stands to reason that they are bound to be found in your Kingdom, and in large quantities, antiquities such as old stools, pipes, horns or even old statues. These things, if well treated, could fetch quite a handsome amount from tourists."

He did not mention the ***Akeukeuor***. He merely talked of statues in general. It was when the Chief confessed that they had not got anything of the sort which could fetch him

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money that the D.O. mentioned it. And even then, although it was the main purpose of the meeting, the D.O. only mentioned it in passing. He said:

"You can't afford to say that. If you have been very observant you would have seen many. A thing like *Koko*, or what is it your people call their god, (he deliberately mispronounced the name to dispel any iota of suspicion that he had any particular interest in the art work) could bring money. Not less than a hundred thousand francs."

The Chief fell for it. He sat still for a very long time. On his own he could never have conceived that kind of idea. But the mention of one hundred thousand francs raised a kind of feeling in his breast which destroyed any instinct to resist the idea on grounds of the supreme importance of the statue in the lives of the people. He found this suggestion dovetailing conveniently into an already carefully worked out plan to resign that post of Chief and take up trading in the coast. One hundred thousand francs was the right amount of money he required as capital for embarking on a trade.

He had only one fear: It could go seriously against him if the people found out. He tried to figure the extent of the gravity of any action the Elders could take against him if the theft were discovered. He could not see beyond a dethronement. And if dethronement was the worst to be expected, what else could be more welcomed? He was asking God for nothing less. What did it matter to him if he was dethroned after he had amassed enough money to settle down to a peaceful life? He had already got quite much from his very intelligent manipulation of the money that was given to him to keep for the construction of the new school.

When he expressed that apprehension the D.O. encouraged him:

"Your people should not know, unless you tell them. You do not need to go to the palace with a gong and go about announcing that you want to sell statues and that they

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should put the matter to the vote. You know how often they have disagreed with you. They can't agree. You may even be surprised to hear that they are very happy to find you in this disgraceful situation. If they are pleased that you are like this, I am not. That is why I am making every effort to get you out of it. If you are interested in saving your life and prestige, I will send for a statue of the same size as the one that is there to be carved. We shall put it up in the same place for them to worship. Do they ever open it to see the body of the statue?"

The Chief answered in the negative, completely overwhelmed by the D.O.'s argument.

"Then where is the fear? They will worship anything, so long as they do not know what it is. And even if they know, that should be no problem as far as I am concerned. I am the law. The discovery cannot even be in your own life time. Nor mine. Even till the end of this century. Assuming that they see it, I will simply tell them to shut up and that will close the matter."

And so he had proceeded with his casuistry, the kind of logical hair-splitting that cast a spell on the Chief. By the time he had finished making his point the Chief had vowed three times to take his revenge on those old men, to outwit them. And with this in mind he set out to work. It was he who contacted and got the men who cut the statue and carried it out of the palace.

In the tribe, Ngobefuo seemed to stand all alone. Not everybody liked his dictatorship. It was therefore not difficult for the Chief to enlist the service of some Elders who, upon the promise of the sum of five thousand francs and a bottle of gin each, brought the statue to the D.O.'s waiting Land Rover at the gate of the palace. The same people took the fake god back and had it planted with wax on the stump of the real god. Then they covered it again to make it look as if that was the way it had always been.

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Back in his compound, the D.O. embarked on the last phase. Although he had succeeded in convincing the Chief and some Elders, he knew that it would be foolhardy to carry the statue out of Small Monje exposed. So, as soon as the D.O. had paid the Chief and the Chief had in turn paid the men who helped him, he had a large coffin made to contain the gigantic statue. A certificate of death and other accompanying documents were prepared for the fictitious corpse inside the coffin. Two professional mourners were hired to pose as relatives of the deceased. They were to accompany the coffin to the place of burial down the coast.

That was how the ***Akeukeuor*** travelled from Small Monje undetected, a distance of about seven hundred kilometres.

Unfortunately, like most conspiracies that fail, there had been a loophole. The D.O. had duly delivered the statue and had received his money. It had been left at the harbour because Virchow meant to send it home by sea. It had arrived two full days before the ship was expected to start loading. So, while Virchow looked for a place to preserve it, widespread suspicion was aroused by the presence of such a very large coffin in the possession of a white man.

The police had been alerted. Neither Ngobefuo nor Achiebefuo knew anything about this subsequent development. Ngobefuo believed that their god had been stolen and sold by Achiebefuo, and the accused had admitted his guilt. Nothing else mattered.

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As for Achiebefuo, he knew that the D.O. had once asked him to carve a statue which he used as a ruse to steal their god. He thought it was still possible for him to explain himself. But Ngobefuo turned his back on him and walked off. Achiebefuo ran like a child after him and barring his way went down on his knees and begged:

"My first man, if I have ever meant anything to you and to the tribe for all these seventy years that we have eaten together, walked together and slept together, please listen to me."

"You do not expect *me*, Ngobefuo, to listen to a creature like you, Achiebefuo. After living with me for one hundred years, after working with me for one hundred years and protecting the ways of our people, I should not be the one to tell you how wrong it is for you, an ordinary mortal, to imitate the nature of our god - for whatever reason."

Achiebefuo blamed himself. How could he have failed to see something wrong in accepting the D.O.'s request?

"And you did, Achiebefuo! ***Akeukeuor*** was stolen in the eleventh moon. We offered the sacrifice of cleansing the tribe the following moon. We offered the sacrifice which was supposed to wash our tribe clean to the god you made!"

Achiebefuo was silent, his head bowed in guilt and he was full of remorse.

"Achiebefuo, do you hear how it sounds in your own ears? The god you made," he repeated. "Achiebefuo, have you now started making gods for the tribes? You said you had meant something to the tribe. If you had been anything

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to this tribe let me tell you that this one act of yours cancelled all. If our lives have had any meaning at all either to each other or to the tribe, it only came from the protection we gave to our tribe, its interests, its laws which our fathers and forefathers laid down for us to follow. If you have decided to turn against me in this sacred duty, then I do not know how you expect me or the tribe to take you seriously again. You have failed me and so I do not have the ear to listen to you at all."

So saying Ngobefuo spat in front of Achiebefuo.

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Part Two

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Chapter Two

BECKONGNCHO, A teacher from the coast was the one who had brought the news of the stolen god. This effort endeared him to Ngobefuo so much that he was the only person Ngobefuo trusted and could listen to at the moment. He told Ngobefuo:

"Father, we shall do it this way if we are to succeed...."

"When the god of your tribe is stolen, my son, you don't talk about succeeding any more. Things have never been like this anywhere, never. What else is there to be done, son? Tell me, we have changed places."

"To cut ***Akeukeuor*** and carry it to the coast cannot possibly be done by one man, father," Beckongncho told him. "What I suggest is that we find out who else worked with my father, Achiebefuo. ***Akeukeuor*** is too big to be carried by one man."

"So what is to be done? Tell me."

"We should call an emergency meeting of all the Elders. There we break the news to them and watch the reactions of the Chief and the other seven people whom I told you might be involved in the incident. If that fails, we go to the D.O. and, father, let me tell you that right now I see the D.O.'s hand very deep in the matter."

"My son, there is dust in my eyes, there is cotton wool in my ears. I hear nothing and see nothing, only wickedness and treachery."

"You just summon that meeting and I will see and listen for you."

"I will, son. But did I hear you say Goment's hand is in it?"

"Father, ***Akeukeuor*** could never have reached the coast

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without the help of a lorry. The D.O. is the only person here who has one. There are road-blocks in the villages along the road down to the coast and there are policemen at every one of them. If ***Akeukeuor*** passed through them without being stopped and brought back, the carrier must have been somebody with supreme authority over the police. Only the D.O. has such powers. Achiebefuo will have to be present. We shall have to force him to say who asked him to carve it. It is not enough that he had admitted his wrong."

"My son," Ngobefuo began as soon as he heard Achiebefuo's name mentioned. "I need not tell you that Achiebefuo was my shadow for all the years we worked together. I have seen things these last five years that would make me grind my teeth if I had any left. I was Fuo-ndee's shadow from the day they put the crown on his head to the day he was put into the earth. Not a single word of shame was ever heard about this tribe. Now things are happening before our own eyes which in the days gone by would have been impossible to dream of. Look at the crown! Look at our god!"

He rose as soon as he finished the last word and went down to the *nteuh*, took up two sticks and, now intoxicated with rage, struck it furiously. The sound of the *nteuh* at 4 o'clock in the afternoon sent waves of alarm and bewilderment throughout the eleven villages that made up the tribe. The *nteuh* was never struck by day. It was not struck by an ordinary mortal. And Ngobefuo knew that. Yet it was the only thing to do. To wait until it was dark before going to tell the Chief to ask his masquerade to do it, meant taking too many chances. Knowing the Chief for what he was, the possibility of a refusal to order his masquerade could not be ruled out. He did not want to risk alerting the Chief who may likely frustrate his efforts to get at the root of the mystery. Ngobefuo's mind had become poisoned to the extent that he could not delay breaking the news for another day.

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As soon as he struck the *nteuh* he assumed the duties of 'caller'. Anticipating much confusion he descended into the main compound and stood there, telling everybody who came rushing down to enquire what the matter was, to go into the *ndie-ndee* and wait.

He did not tell anybody why. Important Elders who were absent at the time were immediately sent for, while the others settled down in the hall. Within an hour, with only a few exceptions, they were all gathered in the great hall.

The Chief, most unconstitutionally, had not been given as much as a whispered hint of the purpose of the meeting. He was simply told that the Elders had something to say in his presence. He came in one hour later when everybody had assembled, and he was coming only to protest against the sudden encroachment on his royal prerogative. He would use that kind of behaviour as one of the reasons for resigning his office as soon as the occasion presented itself.

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Except for the brief calm following the sudden closure of the house of Chiefs to which he was a member, Chief Nchindia had always believed in presenting a very sophisticated appearance. He had lived at the coast for most of his life and had never ceased trying to look enlightened. He had never drunk from the traditional horn of office right from the very first day he started earning a salary as the Paramount Chief. He had refused from the first day of his coronation to touch the Royal Pipe. There was something in its bulk that repulsed him, though he smoked cigarettes regularly.

When he appeared for this particular meeting he was wearing a spotless white nylon shirt with a silk scarf round his neck. He was also wearing his favourite blue jeans whose folded hem contrasted with his traditional loincloth.

As ever, a packet of *Benson and Hedges* showed in very clear outline in his breast pocket. His silver gas-lighter was in his right hand, and he held a cigarette daintily between the thumb and index finger. As soon as he was comfortably seated he seemed to draw attention to himself by striking the lighter several times without using the flame. Then he finally lit the cigarette and started smoking in his characteristic manner: He would pull at the cigarette for a very long time and then blow out the smoke in puffs which he caused to rise up towards the roof in spirals and rings. He would then raise his head a bit and blow a whiff of air through the spirals and rings.

There was nothing actually new in all these antics. The old men had seen them quite often; an attitude they considered as a milestone in the eroding of the awe and

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respect which was once shown towards the throne of Nkokonoko Small Monje.

On this occasion Ngobefuo viewed these mannerisms as a blind defiance and insolence on the community; an arrogant display of royal nonchalance, an unabashed confirmation of his involvement in the selling of their god. The Chief himself spoke first:

"Fathers, I do not know the purpose of this meeting. If I should take your hundreds of pieces of advice seriously, then I think that to strike the *nteuh* is an affair of the night, done only by the Chief's masquerades. The summoning of a meeting in this hall is the expressed right of...."

Ngobefuo would not allow the Chief to finish talking. He rose to his feet:

"Son of Fuo-ndee, this useless old man talking to you now was twenty and five years the masquerade of a Chief. A real Chief." He stressed the last two words. "We are glad to hear that our Chief knows so much about the tradition of his people."

Nobody took this statement for a commendation, not even the Chief himself who knew he never met Ngobefuo on any level other than conflict. The man wiped his mouth, looked round the hall and went on:

"My brothers and the Chief, you know that before a dog impregnated its mother, it all began like a joke - scratching her back, smelling and licking her anus while she urinated. Then one day it happened. But what am I saying?"

There was silence. He looked round.

"When on the day of the big sacrifice rain fell and we were forced to put it off for another day. People were saying that Ngobefuo was wishing the tribe ill when I said the gods were not yet happy with us."

He paused for a very long time before breaking off again in a flight of oratory which instantly put the fire out of every listener's pipe. Very graphically, he traced the history of the tribe, where they came from and the thousand-and-one mortal combats they had encountered and survived

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throughout those centuries. All along he laid the greatest possible emphasis on the importance of the tradition, the omnipotence and omnipresence of their ancestors and their continuous protective influence in the management of the tribe from the very beginning of things right down to the last Catching Ceremony which made Nchindia the Chief. This he called the end of an epoch: the epoch of order and respect, and the beginning of another epoch, an epoch of confusion, disrespect and shame.

Very specifically he told them what had throughout been responsible for their miraculous deliveries, even during that period of shame. It was the ***Akeukeuor***. He described its origin, size and power and its rank in the hierarchy of gods anywhere. He told them that both in conception and execution it was not the work of an ordinary mortal. It had been wrought, he said, from the hands of a being who had dined with the gods of old, at the tables of history. At this moment of climax in his speech he swung round and facing the Chief announced:

"The bottom of our world has fallen out. Some among us here have cut ***Akeukeuor*** and sold to a white man - for money."

On that note he virtually staggered back to his seat. Half way through his very emotional address, the fire had gone out of his own pipe. Deeply engrossed in his message he had not had time to put it back in his bag. He had merely bent down and placed it on the floor. When he turned to resume his seat he stepped on it, crushing it.

Such an accident could have occurred to anybody in the same frame of mind. But in the Biongong culture of which Small Monje was a part, to step on one's pipe or to sit on it was an act bordering on real insanity. It implied a total lack of control of one's senses.

Everybody saw what had happened, nobody knew which to react to, the heart-rending news of the loss of their god or that major sign of insanity which Ngobefuo had just manifested. It was mainly this act which in the hearts of

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the truly honest men, seemed to cast a doubt over the veracity of his declaration. He had started talking by calling his brothers first and not the Chief. He had talked of the impossible - the stealing of their god. And then he had worsened matters by stepping on his own pipe!

Ngobefuo seemed straightaway to read their minds.

"I am not sick in the head, my dear brothers,"he rose again, contemplating the broken pieces of the pipe in the centre of the floor. "I know I have stepped on my pipe. But let that not worry you at all. We have a case in hand."

Beckongncho's eyes were fixed not on Ngobefuo or the broken pipe but on the Chief and some of the Elders whom his investigation considered likely suspects. The people of Nkokonoko Small Monje have an expression for describing the reaction of a man surprised in an act. They say he behaved like a rat caught in the centre of a dark room by the sudden introduction of a blazing flame. Chief Nchindia and his accomplices had been caught in that unguarded position. The Chief immediately went through an abrupt change of countenance that made his breathing difficult and his chest palpitated visibly.

Ngobefuo's speech and the news it brought with it was apt to enrage an innocent person, not to mention the Chief who occupied such an important position of power. But the Chief had only stretched and coughed and then, holding his head down for a full minute, he decided to smoke another cigarette. He pulled out one which he stuck to his shivering lips and tried to light it. The lighter glowed at the first attempt and then he tried to make the cigarette catch fire. It wouldn't. Perhaps he was trying to light it from the wrong end. He eventually abandoned the fruitless effort and threw both the cigarette and lighter on the ground before him. The words of the D.O. came to his mind:

"The discovery will never be made in your lifetime. It will take a miracle for anybody to discover the loss." The miracle had occurred, and in his own lifetime! He rose to go out, but Ngobefuo too got up and, standing in his way, he said:

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"His Highness, I beg in the name of all my brothers who run this tribe, to say that nobody will leave this hall until we have known who have done this cut-throat act to the tribe." His voice was charged with hate and there was every indication that if the Chief dared to insist he would be restrained by force.

"Even me?" the Chief asked wearily, without conviction, and even smiling drily. "I don't know anything about it. I am completely innocent."

"We have not said His Highness knows anything about it. We only said our god is stolen. Let His Highness not bring suspicion onto himself,"Ngobefuo said grimly.

Casually and amidst much cross-talk, murmurs and grumbling, Chief Alexander Nchindia made the undignifying retreat to his seat. Some people thought Ngobefuo had gone too far. One of the Elders rose to the centre of the floor to talk. He was Ndenwontio. He was one of the two Elders whose involvement in the outrage Beckongncho's investigation had failed to make clear. But as far as Ngobefuo was concerned, since Achiebefuo had confirmed his guilt, it was hard for him to consider anybody else innocent without valid proof to the contrary. The man said:

"His Highness and my brothers, ***Akeukeuor*** is not the god of Ngobefuo. It is our god. Ngobefuo is the caretaker of the tribe and not the caretaker of our god. Who asked him to take things so personal as to be the only one to know about such an important secret, and only let us know in the market like this? Are we children to him? And if it happens that what he is saying had actually taken place, I will never pardon him for holding us all of so little account. This kind of dance he is doing with our Chief does not please me at all. And look at those attending meetings in the *ndie-ndee* with our Chief! Children!"

He was directing the comment at Beckongncho who, according to tradition, was not supposed to be there. "And I know this must be Ngobefuo's idea. Look around you, are

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we all here? I do not know whether it means anything at all to Ngobefuo."

It is true for those who know the story of the two men that his confrontation with Ngobefuo was always coloured by the thought that it was he and not Ngobefuo who ought to have been the caretaker of the tribe. But what he had just said won the approval of all. And as soon as he resumed his seat another elder rose. He was Ajem-abeule. He told them:

"I also felt the spittle of Ngobefuo on my face. ***Akeukeuor*** was not made for you, or you," he went on pointing from one person to the other. "It was not made for Ngobefuo. It was made for the whole tribe, which is more than the few grains of us sitting here now. This is not a dream for Ngobefuo to dream alone. It is not right for a single man to judge for us all, if anything of the sort has happened, may the gods pardon me for repeating the words!"

At this point he was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Ngangabe, weeping. The new-comer announced that Achiebefuo had died!

"Died?"Everybody was shocked. "How?"

Ngangabe explained: "When I heard the *nteuh* and was coming I met my father-in-law going back. I wondered and asked him whether he was not going to answer to the call of the drum. He said he would not go. I asked him why, and he said Goment had killed him. I was still on my way down here when a child came riding behind me to tell me that he had hanged himself."

"Yes, that is quite in order," Ngobefuo jumped up to clear the confusion. "If Achiebefuo has hanged himself, let nobody mourn for him. His death is connected with the theft of our god. He was in my hut to confess that he carved the statue we have been worshipping and offering sacrifices to."

At this juncture Ndenwontio and Ajem-abeule began, as did several others, to discern some reason in Ngobefuo's madness. They all decided to go first to the shrine and see it for themselves.

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There they saw the truth. It was not their god. Ngobefuo went to the earthen wall behind the shrine and lifted a piece of bamboo with which he began to push away the earth which had been carefully used to cover the pedestal. To everybody's painful view the layer of thick wax which had been used to fix the fake statue on the stump of the real god was exposed. Ndenwontio was not only convinced but inflamed. He asked Ngobefuo:

"My brother, tell us. How did you get to know that the thing under that black cloth was no longer ***Akeukeuor***? How did you even go to fine out?"

Ngobefuo called for Beckongncho from behind the group and he told them the story: A statue had been seized from a white man at the coast some months ago. Its enormous size had attracted the attention of a worker in the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and eventually the police had come in. The exact story of how the man came by the statue had not been obtained. But the news of the statue had spread very rapidly, drawing the attention of hundreds of people who flocked into the Ministry to see it. There were several Biongongs amongst those who came to see it. *The Biongong Cultural Association* in the coast had delegated its President, Kevin Beckongncho to go to Small Monje and make sure that it was not their great god that had been the subject of such scandal.

Ndenwontio's reaction to the story was instantaneous. The shock of discovery, the sincerity of Beckongncho's account and the very enormity of the crime drove away any private differences he had ever had with Ngobefuo. He quickly believed and forgave Ngobefuo when the latter said

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it was distrust which made him reluctant to discuss the matter privately with any other person, after Achiebefuo had admitted. Ndenwontio marched up to the statue, pulled it down and then told Ngobefuo:

"This is what you ought to have done in the first place. You don't allow its roots to enter the soil on which ***Akeukeuor*** ever stood." He gave orders for it to be dragged to the palace arena.

That was done.

Throughout the trip to the shrine and back the Chief had not as much as uttered a single syllable. His reactions were very unspontaneous, conditioned only by those of other people. His hands went up to his head each time a man instinctively threw up his hands in surprise. Each time a man bit his finger and shook his head in bitterness he would do same, if that was the general reaction.

Back in the palace, Ndenwontio gave orders (he had suddenly assumed control of the situation), for the fake god to be chopped into pieces. When this was done he asked for some kerosene to be brought which he poured on the wood and set it ablaze. Then as the last bits were being consumed he conferred with Ngobefuo and then told the people:

"We shall all swear our innocence in this matter by licking the ashes of this demon, in the name of *Ku-ngang*."

Another half hour was spent in wondering whether it was not an act of greater impiety to the ancestors to ignore the ashes of a statue which had been used to defile the image of their god to swear to such an important deity as *Ku-ngang*. This was especially the point of view held by those who were not exactly innocent, and who seemed bent on prolonging the arguments.

But how else were they to detect the traitors? Ndenwontio had made the suggestions upon the confident assumption that no true Biongong in his right senses would

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agree to swear by *Ku-ngang* when he knew deep in his heart that he was culpable. It meant sudden death. On the other hand, Ngobefuo made it clear that it was no impiety because people had been known to swear by *Ku-ngang* by licking excrement. He told those who were trying to distort the tradition in their self-interest that to swear over anything was essentially to ask *Ku-ngang* to reduce the individual to the state of the substance he had sworn with, if he was perjuring.

But when he insisted on the swearing they were not brought any nearer to the solution of the problem because everybody swore and stood back, looking doubly healthy. Some of the culprits even swore twice and more to emphasize their innocence.

Ngobefuo refused to consider the possibility which was beginning to take root in his mind that Achiebefuo had acted alone. He asked Ngangabe what Achiebefuo had really told him.

"He said Goment had killed him, father."

Ngobefuo reflected for a whole minute and then asked:

"As people who have heads, what do you think Achiebefuo meant by that?"

At this stage it was unanimously agreed that the matter be referred to the D.O. They allowed themselves only a few minutes within which somebody was sent round to get lamps. Ngobefuo insisted that they all stick together until the real facts had been known. He stood by the Chief, with Ndenwontio on the other side, and the two prevented Nchindia from taking anything else apart from his wallet and pullover.

His wife and children were no longer in the palace, he had long sent them to the coast to wait for him. He regretted parting with his family. He wondered what the future held for them. A rare feeling came over him and he began to fear that he may never see them again.

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Chapter Three

THE D.O. was at home. There in Small Monje he had nowhere else to go for relaxation outside his home or office. It was half past 9, but he was already in his pyjamas. He had just taken several shorts of Gin and was browsing over a book to invite sleep, when he sighted lamps at a distance through the corner of his eye. He looked out of the window and called for the officer who guarded his compound. When the man came he asked him to go up to the people and ask them why they were coming to disturb him. At the same time he unchained the dog which had been sleeping beside him and ordered it to chase them off. He then retired to his room and laid in his bed.

A few minutes afterwards the officer was knocking at his door to tell the D.O. that the Chief and the Elders of the Council of the tribe said they wanted to see him on an important issue.

"Go and tell them that I am asleep." he told the officer. When the officer took the message to them the people said they would wait until he woke up, even if it meant staying the whole night at the gate. They knew the D.O. was not yet in bed and that he just did not want to speak to them. After some twenty minutes when they made it plain to the officer that they may have to force their way into the compound and wake him up to listen to them, the officer took fright and went in to consult with his master. Ten minutes later the D.O. appeared at the window of the parlour and, leaning out, asked:

"Why do you people want to see me?"

Although the compound was heavily fenced it was not very large. Anybody like the D.O. with a big voice could

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easily make himself heard at the gate from the house. It was Ndenwontio who answered him:

"We have not been coming to see Goment in the night. Goment should have known without out telling him that our reason for coming is very important. Something terrible has happened to us. If he does not want to receive us let him tell us, we shall go back as we came." His voice was deep, clear and vibrated with suppressed indignation. Indeed it seemed to quaver as he spoke, as though he was trembling.

"Is it about your land?" he enquired.

"It is not about our land," Ngobefuo told him.

"And what if it is about our land?" Ngangabe spat just when the D.O. was about to give orders for the gate to be opened. Ndenwontio told the fiery Ngangabe to be patient until they had trashed out the issue uppermost in their hearts, the issue which had made them miss their sleep.

The D.O. hesitated when he heard the voice of Ngangabe. He had not imagined that the man would be there with them. What was he going to do with the rascal that night? And now Ngangabe had spoken to him rudely again. What could they have come for? War? Obviously Ngangabe was the only sprightly young blood in their company. One tree cannot make a forest. He leaned out and peered again just to assure himself that it was not the whole tribe that had come.

They were hardly more than twenty. Were the rest hiding in the bush? Were they waiting for him to let in the old men? If so, then they had not planned the strategy well because if he arrested those he was seeing at the gate, it would be too late for those in the bush to do anything. No, he resolved, they had not come for war. He decided he would listen to them.

He called the officer and told him to 'open fire on anybody who tried any dirty tricks.' He was not taking any chances. Then asking the officer to let them in he walked out to the veranda to receive them. The dog too came back after having tried unsuccessfully to frighten them away and he chained

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it. They marched in and as they climbed to the veranda, the Chief stepped forward and greeted. The D.O. answered with a condescending nod, offering his wrist because he was still holding a book in his hand with his fingers stuck between the pages. The Chief received the wrist with a respectful bow, an act which stuck the old men like an arrow through the heart.

"Tigers have become goats!" Ngobefuo mumbled, shaking his head resentfully. A suppressed and aching sense of personal inferiority expressed itself in their Chief's whole bearing. It made the more reflective Elders think about the good old days with profound regret. They remembered the days of Fuo-ndee. He was a fearless and absolute monarch, who could, even in the days of the white man, give any orders to anybody. His words were the law and everybody obeyed. It was the D.O. who would have been sent for to answer them in the palace with just one word from the Chief!

The D.O. offered the wrist to another elder who following the Chief's example, received it with equal reverence. Ngobefuo was next. He would have kicked the hand away if he had the energy and nerve. He just stood there, staring at it until the D.O. showed it to another person, Ndenwontio. The man turned his face away. The rest were not given the opportunity to decide what to do with it because Ngobefuo stepped forward and interrupted what he considered an insult with:

"Goment, we have come to see you at this time of night because of an affair which threatens our very existence. Will Goment listen to us? Or not?"

"What is it about?" the D.O. asked after a very long silence. He was standing against the wall with hands folded and regarding Ngangabe in the face with intense suspicion. Then he lowered his eyes and stared around their waists in case they carried any swords. There was nothing. Just then Ndenwontio responded to his question:

"Goment, if it was a thing we could talk on our feet we

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would not have suffered to come here at this time of the night...."

"Do we have boils on our buttocks and jiggers in our feet that we cannot enter under the roof and sit on the chairs in a house which was built with the labours of our hand and on our own land?" Ngangabe asked.

The D.O.'s first instinct was to tell them to go away. After all they no longer mattered to him. Besides, Ngangabe had stated an unconscious fact. The D.O. knew they really had jiggers in their feet, though he was not so sure about the boils. He knew that each time he received people from the village the servants had to sweep the veranda and spray it with insecticides to protect the children's feet. He reflected and then asked them again what they had come for.

Although the suggestion to go to the D.O.'s house had been so unanimously accepted, the reason for doing so varied with the number of people present. The suggestion had been made by Ngangabe, but he had anticipated Ngobefuo's consent. Going to see the D.O. was exactly what Ngangabe and Beckongncho had agreed upon if the meeting had failed to produce any good result. Ngangabe had said so, not because it would lead to any discovery of the thieves. He wanted an opportunity to go near his arch-enemy and make him understand his grievances over the land. And coupled with other reasons he wished the D.O. could drop dead for all he cared.

For the Chief the suggestion came as a God-sent blessing. In that heavily charge atmosphere he could think of no safer place than the D.O.'s house. Besides, it lay on the way to the coast from Small Monje. If by any means it became impossible for him to return to the palace as he silently prayed and hoped for, he would have no cause for regret.

The suggestion found favour with the culprit Elders who had co-operated with him in the theft. The D.O. had promised them that in the very unlikely event of a discovery, he would use his power of office to silence Ngobefuo or

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anybody else who dared to contradict him. The rest of the Elders supported because nobody protested against it. And throughout the four kilometre journey to the D.O.'s house they had not thought it necessary to work out any careful method of presenting their case, who would talk, in what order and what to do if things turned out one way or the other.

When the D.O. enquired, Ngobefuo rose and stood silent for a long time without speaking. He was a very sombre man, always sensitive about his conduct in a crisis involving the breach of an article of their tradition. He stood almost paralysed. The unexpectedness, the sheer monstrosity of the theft of their god, together with the involvement of his intimate friend had shakened him. He was no longer his former self. He made three attempts to tell the D.O. exactly what had happened, what they felt about it. But on all three occasions bitterness, disappointment and disillusionment crept into his mind and overwhelmed it to the point that he could not talk.

Noticing this Ndenwontio came to his aid. He decided to begin the story his own way by tracing the history of gods in their tribe. Ajem-abeule interrupted him and asked him to go straight into the heart of the matter.

"Which one of you is talking?" the D.O. asked exasperatingly, glancing at his watch for the fifth time. "Things are never done this way," he added. "I have often told you people this."

"We are all of one blood and one mouth goment," Ngangabe said. "We do not have any one person who will talk for us. Everybody's heart is full. If you will not listen to all of us you will listen to nobody."

"What has happened, Chief?" the D.O. turned to Nchindia, completely ignoring Ngangabe's fury. Like a child reporting to an adult the loss of another's plaything Nchindia said off-handedly:

"They say their statue is stolen, sir."

These words brought Ngobefuo suddenly back to his

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senses and he analyzed them in his heart. *They* implied that he himself was not convinced about it and could never have said the statue is missing. And to put it so carelessly, "their statue has been stolen" - showed how little he valued ***Akeukeuor***.

"What did His Highness say?"

Nchindia did not repeat himself. Ngobefuo put the point across to the D.O. more clearly:

"Goment, ***Akeukeuor***, god of gods of this land has been stolen."

The D.O. shuddered momentarily and smiled. He then asked, looking at the Chief:

"Were they told that it was stolen and kept here?"

Nchindia shrugged and looked round at them.

"Yes, Goment, it was our father Achiebefuo, whom you have caused to die who said so," Ngangabe answered.

Ngangabe was naturally a very careless and impulsive talker. He had not meant by that response to accuse the D.O. He had merely wanted to give an answer, to make his voice heard, no matter how inappropriate, no matter how unfounded. It was this impetuous retort, however, which turned the key that set the truth of the mystery free. Not only did it immediately turn the scales against the Chief and the other collaborators in the act, but it also determined the course which the complaint was to take for the rest of the evening. It indeed determined the course the entire history of Nkokonoko Small Monje was to take thereafter.

Immediately the D.O. heard this he asked a bit nervously:

"What did you say? You say Achiebefuo has done what?"

"Achiebefuo hanged himself" another Elder told him.

"And what has he said?" the D.O. pressed on, his nervousness becoming more and more obvious in his visage.

"Goment," Ngobefuo stepped in. "We shall not talk of Achiebefuo here now. This is our trouble..." Then Ngobefuo narrated his story.

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The D.O. was compelled to listen until he had finished talking. Another hour of bitter arguments, accusations and counter accusations, recriminations and even direct insults ensued. The Chief maintained a discreet countenance throughout this time.

Although the D.O. had been a bit unnerved and continued for some time to be so because of the mention of Achiebefuo's name, he did not allow himself to panic because he had no illusions about his ability to deal with such yokels. He was certain that the same wits which had enabled him to execute the theft so successfully would come to his aid again. His main worry was whether Virchow had really taken it away from the country or not. He tried at one point to convince them that their statue was actually still where it had always been, and that the news of the loss was a mere figment of their imagination.

That would not work for they told him how Achiebefuo had confessed to having carved the statue which they had worshipped for the past months, and which they had already burnt that evening before coming to see him. This was the point at which the real facts became known. It is often said that when thieves fall out honest men get their due.

The first cause of this disclosure was the mention of Achiebefuo's name. In the D.O.'s guilty mind he thought that Achiebefuo had told them many other things which they might be concealing for some sinister purpose. The cause lay in the old men's manner of talking to him. Then came the D.O.'s attitude towards the problem itself. He did not know how close to their hearts was the existence of that statue. And this determined his entire conduct towards everybody on the issue. It seemed to him that they had taken too much for granted in believing him so readily. The assurance was never a licence for them to talk to him the way they deemed fit. The fact that they were accomplices to that crime did not automatically place them on an equal

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footing with him. That promise was made in secret and only to a handful of people whose existence or death meant very little or nothing to him as D.O.

The Elders, especially Ngobefuo and Ndenwontio, who noticed his changed demeanour, knew he was obviously guilty. They called him names and jeered at him telling him most disrespectfully to stand in the market and clear himself. Up to this point, although all evidence pointed to the D.O. and the Chief, the former refused to accept openly. In the confusion that arose he noticed that the five Elders who had brought the statue to the Land Rover joined the Chief and others to ridicule him. They seemed by their actions to imply that it was none other than the D.O. who had single-handedly stolen into the shrine and cut and carried away the statue. This was unfair. Then, he had below his belt five shots of Gin which though taken for some other purpose added a streak of carelessness to his sense of understanding and interpretation of facts.

The old men involved in the theft knew that they were not sincere in accusing and laughing at the D.O. They had intended it as a mere defence-mechanism which the D.O., they thought, would understand as such, stand his ground and use his authority to intimidate his accusers as he had promised. But as the supreme representative of the Government there, the D.O. saw his prestige so badly threatened that it would have been technically wrong for him to ignore them, admit his guilt and bear the shame. Not even if the story were to end there.

So when Ngobefuo called him an uncircumcised dog, a mad man, and the insults were echoed by the Chief and some three of the men who had cut and carried away the statue, he could no longer bear it. He rose and declared:

"You people are stupid to think I am a mad man and even dare to say so to my face. Go out if you want and consult yourselves, or your gods. And if any of these wretches sitting in here and vomiting rubbish to me (he

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mentioned exceptions and then pointed to those he accused) can say that they do not know who cut your statue, when it left the palace, and for how much it was sold, I will pay it back on the spot, no matter how much it cost".

"If people like you Mbenwo, like you, Tembueloh, Bengobah, Emadomang, like you Konfumong, and especially you Chief, if you took even your palace to anybody to sell, he would not be afraid to pay for it because he knows your position in the tribe.

It was long after midnight when Ngobefuo eventually got everybody gathered again in the meeting hall. Six important personalities were not there. They were the Chief and the five men who had been proved guilty. They had been abandoned in the D.O.'s house. The reason for this second extraordinary meeting was clear: to work together to mend things as far as was humanly possible, and then to decide what to do with whoever had a hand in the crime. A new Council was formed, six men having been selected to take the place of Achiebefuo and the other five they had left in the D.O.'s house. Since the circumstance now called for men of action rather than words, it was found necessary to incorporate one or two people from the younger generation who could defend their cause if it ever came to violence. Ngangabe was unanimously chosen with this purpose in mind.

The new Council then proceeded to take very important and very delicate decisions which they swore by *Ku-ngang* and by licking blood to keep the secret from the culprits. Ngobefuo remained the spokesman. Like the typical Biongong that he was, there was in his nature a puritanical strain of ruthlessness which did not permit him to prescribe half-measures when it came to dealing with transgression against the tribe and its customs. First of all the five Elders were expelled from the Advisory Committee of the Elders of the tribe. As a matter of formality he gave the reasons:

"By this one act of betrayal they have spat on the face

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of the tribe and on the faces of our fathers who had gone before us. They have robbed us of the respect which our old age was supposed to confer on us. These five will never more be with us. Achiebefuo had already solved the problem his own way".

This was unanimously acclaimed as right and just. On the point of Nchindia he said:

"I fear he had made me and my brothers doubt our belief in the protective powers of our ancestors. This thing that he has been doing and which has ended like this, has caused our fathers to turn their eyes away from us their children, just at the time we most needed their guidance. And this has allowed us in our ignorance to violate the sanctity of the shrine of our fathers. In offering a big sacrifice and a solemn prayer to a god who was not there, we have made a mockery of the mystical powers of the spirit that guides us. And this is Nchindia's fault."

He paused and then added:

"Even if this was the first and only thing Nchindia ever did, if he had never done anything before to offend us, this is bad enough. And our custom cannot forgive him. So Nchindia Fuo-ndee will *never* more be our Chief. The throne is henceforth taken away from him, today, in shame."

This too was unanimously accepted as right and just. In fact, any decision which did not favour the quislings was acclaimed as right.

There was silence. He took his time and then went on to give the last word on the matter:

"If ever we are to get another god in this tribe, the stump of the god that was left behind by these wicked brothers of ours, must be watered with blood. And if the blood of the sons of Nkokonoko Small Monje shall spill, then the man who led them, the man whose presence has caused the destruction of everything we were once proud of, shall not be spared. I am talking about Goment. Goment will have to go with them."

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There were no questions. A monstrous crime was about to be answered with an even more monstrous crime. But in their minds nobody could tell anymore which was worse - the crime or the punishment. For those whose memory had not yet failed them, however, this kind of end had been visible right in the beginning.

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Chapter Four

NCHINDIA NEVER wanted to be Chief. On the day of the Catching Ceremony, when the hands of the Chief catcher fell on him instead of falling on Antony Nkoaleck, he fled. Ngobefuo gave him time to come back. When he noticed that Nchindia would not return he called Beckongncho and asked him to fetch some ten strong men to go after the fleeing Chief and bring him back. He then added:

"Tell Nchindia that we have seen enough of their play. Tell him that Biongong is still waiting to crown him here as their new Chief. Just tell him that when you reach him. Do not beg him. This is your spittle, don't let it get dry in the dust before you return." He spat on the dusty ground and sat back to contemplate the gravity of the situation.

After sometime he rose and with an impudent nod of the head he asked the D.O. to follow him. They went into the chamber. Picking up the fragments of desecrated clothing Antony Nkoaleck had thrown away, he asked: "Goment, do you see these things which I am holding like nothing?"

The man remained guiltily silent. He knew that it was his intervention that had sparked off all the confusion.

"This is spittle which we have spat above our heads. One day it will fall back to foul our faces," Ngobefuo added with great foreboding. "We shall never wash our hands clean," he went on.

There was a silence in which a distant voice echoed, like a battle cry. They listened for a while, cleared their throats and then cried back in acknowledgement in the traditional manner.

The new Chief was being brought back. First

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Beckongncho appeared shaking the *afuke-eh*, then another man, and then another, all shaking theirs. Finally came the new Chief borne shoulder high. The group bearing him danced round the arena several times and before they finally put him down, the embarrassment of the last hour or so had long disappeared to be instantly replaced by the hysterical rejoicing for the Chief's return. The rapturous crowd chanted songs of praise joyously tracing the history of the achievements of their Chiefs down to Nchindia. Songs of thanks to the gods of the land who had made this event possible filled the air.

As soon as they lowered Nchindia to the ground the drummers ran mad with excitement again. At the same time, as the custom demanded, people flocked from every angle to encumber the Chief with fanning. But the new Chief still seemed to be making desperate efforts to run away, even pushing away those who came to fan him and causing some to fall in the attempt.

Ngobefuo came up to him and, holding his hand asked him to follow him. They were going towards the holy grove. Achiebefuo, Ndenwontio and three other Elders followed very closely behind them. Three other Chiefs came afterwards, followed by the D.O. and some policemen. They all passed through the grove and came to halt just at the small stream that ran in front of the shrine of **Akeukeuor**, the god of gods.

The statue was completely hidden under a mask of blue-black cloth. Only masquerades ever saw its body. Ngobefuo caused the Chief's stool to be placed on the other side of the stream. The crown of the Paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje was placed on it. He told those present to form a semi-circle opening up at the stream with the new Chief sitting in front of them. He adjusted the folds of his loin cloth, picked up the sceptre and then pointing to the small stream said to the Chief:

"That is the River of Forgetfulness. There we shall wash

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away all your past. There is the stool of our Chiefs. Yesterday it was for your father. He has gone. Today it is for you. There is ***Akeukeuor***, the god of all our gods. He will look after you. And here we are," he pointed to himself and to the other old men. "We are your fathers. We shall advise you." He paused and then said: "Our child and father, we have seen too much already. We do not want to see any more of this kind of thing. Your brother has spat on the face of the tribe. See his spittle," he said holding up the things Antony had torn and thrown away.

He threw them into the stream, waited until they had been swept away completely by the current, then he turned to the Chief again:

"Tell me here and now, I am asking you with the tongue of your father, with the tongue of your forefathers, with the tongue of your ancestors. Will you accept this crown and lead your people as the gods had foreordained, or not?"

There was silence.

"The crown of Nkokonoko Small Monje has never been forced down the head of anybody who is to be their Chief. So we shall not force it on you at all. We only want to make sure that the blame is not on us."

There was silence. Nchindia still held his head down as he did the moment he was asked to sit on the stool.

"Speak," Ngobefuo urged, and then turned to flattery:

"Prince of light, speak. Speak, son of Fuo-ndee himself, king of kings. Conqueror of conquerors. Speak. Are you our Chief or not?"

"I am not the right person to be Chief," Nchindia strained to tell them. But the words stuck in his throat, taking his mind farther and farther back into his past, his days with Antony, the days of their childhood.

Why should it be him to take the crown, and from no other person but Antony, his own beloved brother? Did his mother not start telling him since some twenty years ago that these same old men had said that her father had slept

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with his half-sister, and had said that he would never succeed the Chief because he had bad blood in his veins? Were these not the same people who encourage Nji to be calling him a cat without claws? Had he ever been jealous of the fact that it was only between Nji and Nkoaleck that the new Chief would be chosen?

What had Antony not done for him as a brother? When Nji insulted him to his face that he would be his slave and that his mother would be the very first woman he would sleep with as soon as he became Chief, was it not Antony who beat him until he bled through the ear? Was it not Antony who used to console him every day, telling him not to worry because it was not his fault that he could not be Chief? Was it not Antony who taught him how to choose a career? When Antony completed college did he not come to that same Nkokonoko Small Monje and hold his hand to take him to Likume where he introduced him to the principal of their college who made him the store-keeper?

When Antony was leaving for the University in the white man's country was it not him who in the presence of the whole tribe which gathered to give him a send-off presented him with a cutlass and a broom? How is it possible, O God, that he should now turn round and become the obstacle?

When Nji slept with the Chief's wife and was driven out of the tribe, and their father was dying with Antony still in the white man's country, what did these same people say to him for the four years during which they awaited the return of Antony? Was a regency not formed which was to rule if the Chief died while Antony was still away? Was he not there all that time? Was Ajem-abeule not asked to pay eight goats and work on the Chief's farm for two months for daring to suggest that he, Nchindia, could rule while they waited for Antony? When Antony came back afterwards did they not come together to receive him in the traditional manner of a man who will be Chief? Did they not continue to talk about him until the day before?

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He ground his teeth, tightened his lips and told them without lifting his head from that drooping position:

"My fathers, this crown belongs to my brother Antony...."

"Our son and our father," Ngobefuo called out in a full throated anger. "This crown belongs to Nkokonoko Small Monje. It belongs to the Chief. It belongs to you. You are the Chief."

"My brother Antony is the Chief," Nchindia said as soon as he finished talking.

Ngobefuo threw his hands in the air in utter frustration, paused for a very long time and then said with infinite patience:

"Our son, it is you we have caught. Nkoaleck will *never* be Chief. He *cannot* be Chief. Do you agree or not?"

There was silence. Nchindia lifted his head, and slowly began to look from the trees above to the maddening crowd that seemed to close in on him. His eyes came to rest on the D.O. and the armed policemen by his side, all looking down furiously at him, daring him to deny again. His blood ran cold and he wished he had not raised his head at all.

"For the last time," Ngobefuo began, "do you accept or not?"

There was no answer.

"Look at ***Akeukeuor***. It is looking at you. If you answer you are answering him, the god of the tribe. If you answer you are answering Goment who is looking at you and who is waiting to hear you talk. Speak, we beg you."

"Okay, I agree. I will be Chief," Nchindia gave in finally. Then almost immediately he begged Antony in his heart: "My dear brother, this is not my wish. I have wronged you. Because they are forcing me. You will never forgive me, will you?"

Ngobefuo made him answer three times. Then he turned to the rest of the people and as if they had not been listening said:

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"Nchindia is our Chief."

This was greeted with a very long and deafening applause. Ngobefuo uttered a few words in front of ***Akeukeuor*** and then placing the crown on the Chief's head led him back to the arena.

He was again greeted with cheers and rejoicing. He was shown where to dance, to the centre where he was asked to declare his own dance. He did so. Ngobefuo gave him the sceptre of office and then with a gesture of the hand asked the others to join. They all danced to the tune and as they did so, one traditional robe after the other was placed gracefully on Nchindia. When he was fully encumbered he was led amidst great pomp and pageantry to his throne.

One by one, the other Paramount Chiefs, then the sub-Chiefs, came forward to pay their first official respects to him. The Sub-Chiefs would clap three times and bow until their faces almost touched their knees, then they would follow up the bow with a "Mmmooohhh." They complimented the new Chief, who, acting on instruction from Ngobefuo, acknowledged with only a condescending with nod of the head.

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Chapter Five

THE CATCHING Ceremony took place on Saturday. On Sunday morning, the Chief received his first official visit from the Elders of his Council. The group comprised of Ngobefuo and six other old men. Behind them came servants carrying a jug of fresh palm wine, a roll of tobacco and several other gifts in little bundles.

"We hope His Highness slept very well," Ngobefuo greeted and at once winked at one of the Chief's men to take in the gifts.

"I slept very well," he answered with indifference and in a voice that bore all the traces of insomnia. There was a brief silence and then as the gifts were lowered in front of the Chief, Ngobefuo told him excitedly:

"Your Highness, they have brought you these."

The Chief levelled a look at him and then remained moodily silent. An uncomfortable silence followed. Ngobefuo then volunteered an explanation.

"Your Highness, your people have brought you some clearance and kola."

The Chief looked up as if he had not understood him. Ndenwontio rose and went in and when he came out again a servant came forward with the jug of wine which was placed before the Chief.

"No please, thank you," the Chief protested. "I won't drink now."

"Your Highness," Ndenwontio beamed from a standing position. "Young men wonder why even at this hour when we who already have one leg in the grave can still thread a needle as if we were born this morning. It is this thing," he

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pointed to the jug of wine. "And when do we take it? We take it when we get up from sleep like now. It is this which tells us that we have started a new day. If you do not take it now it will not help when the sun is already up."

"I have said I do not want to drink it now," the Chief told him firmly. Silence set in again.

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A virgin had been chosen to 'wash the genitals' of the Chief on the first night of his coronation. She was the daughter of Chief Fonkyino, a neighbouring Paramount Chief who was specially chosen for this favour in recognition of his continuous friendliness towards the tribe. After that night the virgin was by tradition supposed to become the Chief's favourite wife as it was she who was to bear the Chief's successor.

After everybody else had gone away that evening Nchindia had told the girl to leave him to himself. Too humiliated to go out into the palace and report the disgrace to a third person, the girl had preferred to spend the night in the Chief's parlour.

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Alone in his room Nchindia had spent that first night just sitting up in bed, questioning the whole world around him. He found it impossible to believe that a whole team of human beings like those Elders could so completely fail to be impressed by the virtues of his brother. What was their basis of judgement in going out of their way to prefer him, such a glaring inferior? What did they know on this earth which could ever make him turn to them for advice? They were obviously and shamefully too dull to guide him in his duties as the Chief which they had forced him to become.

That same night too, while he sat wondering, Ngobefuo brought his kinsmen together in the meeting hall to make their very last resolutions on the problem facing them. They all agreed that knowing a lot of books as Nkoaleck had done, did not constitute a satisfactory qualification for anybody to be their Chief; that tradition had always demanded of their chiefs-to-be that they live on the highest level of perfection and respectability; that no matter what the world may be thinking about it, they had set Nkoaleck against that very important standard and had found him most disappointing. Ngobefuo closed the meeting with:

"We all saw what he did to us this morning when we did what we knew was right. Anybody who does not look at this thing from the same way that we are looking at it, such a person will not deserve our respect. He will not deserve our love, even if that person is our Chief."

They all agreed with the stand he took. And it was still very fresh in their minds when they entered the Chief's chamber that morning to present the gifts. When he flatly

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refused to drink the wine Ngobefuo did not insist. He simply proceeded as if nothing had happened. He told the Chief:

"Your Highness, one reason why we have come to see you this morning is that we want you to know early enough how things shall be done. We know that after "the catching" the Chief needs his rest. However, we want His Highness to ponder something very important in his mind."

There was silence, and then he outlined the programme to him:

"This week His Highness knows all his masquerades. And His Highness will be present at all the dances. This is the "catching" week. Then the other week, which will begin like tomorrow, His Highness will see ***Akeukeuor*** again. We shall then visit the other gods of the tribe and present His Highness to them. After that His Highness will be shown his responsibilities as Paramount Chief. His Highness will have to continue from where his father stopped. He will be shown his responsibilities as the new husband of all the wives that his father left behind. None of the children whom His Highness had before last night will ever succeed him to the throne. He will have to look for his own successor. That was why we had to bring the blood of Fonkyino to wash his penis last night."

Here he smiled broadly and then asked:

"Is His Highness listening?"

"I am," the Chief answered sourly. The man pulled his own ear and then asked again:

"Is His Highness listening?"

Again he answered:

"I am."

Ngobefuo took in a very long breath and then continued:

"We would also like to tell His Highness that this is not one week's work. It is not a moon's work. It is not work for a year only..."

The Chief looked up with a start.

"Yes, it is not one year's work," Ngobefuo reaffirmed.

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"It is work for twenty-one moons. For twenty-one moons Your Highness will be with us, moving from there to here." He pointed to the meeting hall and then back to where they were sitting. "Doing only what we want His Highness to do, eating only what we want His Highness to eat, drinking only what we want His Highness to drink, using only the women we want His Highness to use, punishing only those we want His Highness to punish, forgiving only those we want His Highness to forgive..."

"For how many moons?" the Chief marvelled aloud. Ngobefuo brought the fingers of each hand together and hit the clasped tips of those of the left against those of the right twice. Then, following that up by showing him one additional finger he said:

"Twenty-one moons, His Highness."

Nchindia smacked his lips and said nothing more. Ngobefuo continued:

"And after that we shall allow your shoots to grow above the ground because your roots shall have spread wide enough to hold you up." He noticed that the Chief was no longer paying any attention to him.

"Is His Highness listening?" he enquired.

There was no response. He swallowed loudly, remained silent for a while and continued:

"These are not the things we say every day. Tomorrow, Goment will send your name down to Tetseale for your money. Then they will begin to pay you too, moon by moon."

"And my things in the coast?" Nchindia asked softly.

"People will go for them. Beckongncho has been asked to arrange for them to be brought here. He will also get people to stay in your house, work on your farm if you have one, and send what they will get from it to you here. Of course you know that you will need nothing even if you had nothing. To be Chief is to be everything."

The Chief said nothing more. He saw himself a complete prisoner. What experience did he have in his past life to

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prepare him for that sort of life? He asked himself a thousand times but could not find an answer. He was no longer a child. For thirty three years they deliberately left him in total ignorance of the traditional obligations of an heir-apparent. For thirty-three years they denied him the surveillance and guidance to which the other princes, Nji and Nkoaleck were exposed and subjected. Were they now expecting him to work miracles? When Nji or Nkoaleck did anything which in the opinion of the tribe was unbecoming of a prince, were they not always reprimanded? Did they not grow up knowing what was good or not good for a prince who would one day become a Chief? And what did they even say to him? Did it not mean that they considered him worthless? Nji turned bad and was driven away. Fine. Nkoaleck remained good, yet they rejected him. Did they have any criteria at all? They had caught him and forced him at gun-point to say yes. And now instead of leaving him alone, they wanted to school him, as if he had not formed his own ideas about women, about drinks, about food, about crime and punishment, about resolution and independence. Could that ever be possible? Certainly not.

He had always done whatever he liked, whenever he liked and in whatever way he liked. They had by their silence over him encouraged him to believe that this was what was good for him. This he was going to continue to do. Period! If that did not please them, it was not his fault. They come to ruin his life with a bunch of contradictory obligations - you will not do this, you will only do that. Nonsense. He sat quiet until he felt he had somehow gone over that gnawing anger welling up in his heart, then he began:

"Now, let me know, fathers. If it was my brother Antony who had..."

"Your Highness," Ngobefuo rose to his feet. "We wish not to hear you mention the name of Nkoaleck here anymore..."

"Why?"

"We do not want it, that's all. His name is banned from this tribe."

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The Chief sank back into his seat, fixing his dull-looking eyes on Ngobefuo whom he was beginning, so soon, to hold in particular odium. A man of very few words, Nchindia had a temper which was generally inclined to indulge in fits of sullenness. He licked his lips, held down his head and remained silent. The men too sat speechless, wondering how they could begin to disagree with the Chief so early in his reign. They had their pipes, and tobacco too. But as their people would say, they could not smoke because their hearts were not in their pipes. They wondered too whether they will ever be able to bring the Chief to reason with them. When at last they rose to go and bade the Chief good bye, he answered with a nod and without opening his mouth, without lifting his head.

"Do my brothers not see something wrong in this?"

Ngobefuo enquired as soon as they were well outside the house.

Nobody said anything.

"Our Chief has got to learn to say No."

"Yes, Achiebefuo concurred and then added: "We have to teach him how to refuse."

"And why even say No?" Ngobefuo queried. "Why refuse anything we say? Are we children? Is he the one to learn from us or we to learn from him? He should not say No, to us. And if, I say *if* he has to say No, it has not got to be now. It has not got to be like this. It was a gift. That is how human beings do things. But he said No, as if there could never be any other answer in the world to give to us. And he stood by his No. And he did not care to know who had said the things to him!"

He shook his head in disappointment.

"He will taste that wine, my first man," Achiebefuo said with decided optimism. "Twenty-one moons are not twenty-one days. They are not twenty-one weeks. When there is no water, people use spittle to wash their faces. My first man, he will taste it."

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Chapter Six

THE CHIEF could not contain the feeling of guilt, as he thought he had wronged his brother in accepting the crown. It was of no consequence to him that the old men did not like him and would not want to hear his name mentioned. He retired to his room as soon as they left. There were some letters and sheets of papers in a file inside his hand bag. He pulled out the file and took a used envelope from it on which he pasted over the name a carefully cut piece of paper with some sticky liquid he acquired from a tree just behind the house. There was no gum anywhere in the palace. He wrote his brother's name on that envelope and with every nerve militating against composure he sat down and managed to write a letter to him.

7/11/65.

My own Dearest Brother;

I am begging you please to try and read these few words of mine. I have done something to you which I know you will never forgive me until you die. I have taken your crown, after all you did to help me in my life. I have taken your crown, I know. But brother Antony, you were helping me and doing all those things for me because you knew what I was to you. You are still the same brother who used to stand up before our father and say you had committed a crime for which I was guilty. And you used to do so just to protect me from being punished. If you are still the same brother, then let me tell you that I am still the same person you used to help. If you are still the

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same *person, then, brother, please listen to me. I am swearing to God who made heaven and earth that I do not know who took the crown from you and gave it to me. I ran away. I refused. But they caught me and forced me to say yes. I refused but they forced me. What could I do? The D.O. came and stood behind me with soldiers and guns. I told them "yes". But I knew I was doing you a great wrong.*

My dear brother, there is very much I want to tell you about this thing that has happened. But I cannot say it now because I don't think that you will ever want to read anything from such a very wicked man like myself. Brother, if you think you can ever listen to me, tell me, and I shall write to you and tell you all the things I am thinking of. Please reply and ask me to tell you all the things I am thinking about. Please reply and ask me what I have to say.

Your own sincere brother

Alexander Nchindia.

He put the letter in the envelope and sealed it. But where was he going to send the letter to? He had not even thought of that. The only address he knew was Antony's college in the North. But Antony could certainly not have driven back to the North because he had been dismissed from there. He sent for his "caller" and asked him where he thought Antony might have driven to after leaving the scene of the ceremony.

"His Highness," the man began after a long minute's hesitation. "They said he had an accident. They say his wife died there too."

"An accident?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"When?"

"They said yesterday, Your Highness."

"I hope he is alright. You said his wife died?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Both of them."

Could he be dreaming? Could this be true? He wondered.

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He asked the man to go away. He believed that he had killed Antony himself. Yes, he had. He took the letter he had just written and tore it into bits before burning it. His brother had died without hearing from him, without forgiving him. He wept.

In his handbag too there was always a picture he once took with Antony when he just returned from the University. He searched for it and took it out. He did not deserve to stand by Antony, he resolved. He felt that he did not even deserve to live at all, it was Antony who ought to be living because wicked people like himself should be in the grave, not at the palace; he was a thief, and not a Chief.

He cut himself from the picture and burned it, preserving Antony's portion in the space behind his mirror. This he set on the table near his bed in such a way that every time he turned his head towards the table he would see it.

Four days afterwards a relieving piece of news filtered into the grieving Chief's ears. Antony Nkoaleck had not died! He had survived the accident which actually had taken place. But his wife had not been so lucky. She had died on the spot. He was, in fact, admitted at the General Hospital in Kepemnlo in a very critical condition.

He would write to him again, the Chief decided once more. Trying to recall what he had written in the letter he had destroyed, he sat down and wrote a second letter. No sooner had he finished writing the letter than confusion set in again to tear his mind apart. Reading from a man like him, would that not hasten his brother's death? He ought to wait until he had started feeling better before infuriating him with memories of a wicked and treacherous brother. But shall Antony ever get well if he did not know how his brother felt about his loss of the crown? How would he Nchindia, even know when he, Antony, starts feeling better since they did not want to talk about him here? In a fit of frustrated anger he tore the letter he had just written again

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and decided that he would approach his brother through an old friend of his in Sowa, a certain Celina Fey. He wrote to her instead:

C/O The District Office
Nkokonoko Small Monje.
Biongong
Lower-Middle Belt Prov.
12/11/65.

Dear Celina,

You will be surprised to hear that I am now the Chief of my tribe here at home. Please, believe me when I tell you that when I was coming here, I did not know at all that I could ever be chosen. You remember you asked me whom I thought was going to be the new Chief and I replied that it was my brother who used to write to me from overseas. Unfortunately, he was not chosen. I don't know how it really happened, but they refused him and caught me. At first I thought it was a mistake but now it seems that they really did not want him at all. I even ran away into the bush. I really wanted to escape back to Sowa but they sent people and they caught me and forced me to agree. And now my brother has gone and had an accident because of that. His wife died in the accident.

They say he is at the General Hospital at Kepemnlo in a very bad condition of health. I want to write to him and tell him that as soon as he is well I shall call him here and give him back the crown because it belongs to him. If these stupid old people do not like it, I shall leave the throne so that they can choose the kind of fool they like to rule for them.

Please, if you really believe me and you have any love and sympathy for me, take this letter to the Kepemnlo General Hospital. The whole thing is making me very sad and sick, but I fear that he will not want to hear anything from me. I am afraid that he believes that I took his crown. Ask to see him and speak to him for me. I don't know the ward where he is admitted. But I do not think you

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will have any difficulty finding him. Let him know how I feel. Use the 2.000 francs inclosed here for your transport fare.

Please tell him why I fear to write to him directly. I do not have any money here now with me because I did not know that I was not going to return to Sowa. I know this money will not be sufficient but take this letter to our contribution place at the end of the month and withdraw my own share. Give 5.000 francs to my brother Antony for his use, reduct whatever amount you will spend for your journey to Kepemnlo and back, then send me the rest. They say I shall be inside the palace for 21 months. They say, very soon, the Government will start paying me. But I am not happy at all.

Please Celina, have pity on me and do not disappoint me for what I am asking you to do for me. I have so much confidence in you that I have left all my relatives to choose you to help me. I want to know how my brother is feeling. His name is Antony Nkoaleck. I want him to know that as soon as the 21 months are over he will get back his crown. Please go there immediately you receive this letter.

Yours truly in heart

Nchindia Alex.

The Chief had merely written a letter which he had given to be posted. It had not even reached its destination. In fact, it was never to reach it. But for the first time since his coronation he found himself in very high spirit - hungry for food, thirsty for drinks. He was glad that he had at last thought of somebody who would really unfold his feelings to his brother. News about his brother would most certainly reach him, even if he should refuse to write back. He will at least know that all is not yet lost.

Ntongntong was the messenger to take the letter to the District Office where stamps were sold in the post office section.Before he left with the letter the Chief sent for Ngobefuo, Achiebefuo and Ndenwontio. Now that he was sure to hear from his brother, he wanted to know the people's attitude towards the accident, and if possible suggest that

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somebody be sent from the tribe to verify and inform them about the extent of the accident.

"I heard two days ago that my brother died in an accident, fathers," he began as soon as they had sat down. "And this morning again I heard that it was not really..."

He could not finish what he had to say because as soon as he mentioned his brother's name they all rose and walked out without uttering a word. The Chief remained speechless where he was sitting for over ten minutes, mouth agape in bewilderment. And by the time they had completely disappeared in the distance all his worries and weariness had come back tenfold.

"What does this mean?" he asked Ntongntong who remained with him. "What exactly has my brother done?" he acquired, vainly trying to look back across the landscape of preceding events to see if he could discover or even construct a cause for this abominable behaviour on the part of the Elders. The old man looked even more surprised than the Chief. When the Chief repeated his question he did not answer him directly. He instead asked:

"Did His Highness ever hear that Nkoaleck came back from the white man's country two full days before the day the tribe had contributed money to go and see him climb down from the aeroplane?"

"I was in Likume at that time," the Chief told him.

"Did His Highness ever hear what Nkoaleck said to the tribe when it gathered in Anuse's house to receive him?"

"I was at the party myself!" the Chief said again.

"Did he talk like a true Biongong child?"

The Chief did not answer him. To him none of the things he had so far mentioned constituted any cause for such an uncompromising grievance against Anthony.

"Did His Highness ever hear that Nkoaleck refused to marry the daughter of Kwe-nwoh? I mean the daughter of the man who paid his fees in the white man's country; the

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girl the family sat down and chose for him, to thank Kwenwoh for his good work."

"I see that as his personal affairs. He did not like the girl, that's all."

"And he married the daughter of Pa Godsabi, later he drove her away to go and die. Then he married a Munchi girl. And the Goment had removed him from his work."

Silence.

"His Highness thinks these things are personal. But let me say that a man who is to rule has no personal things. Whatever he thinks and does must be for the people. The people must like it." He paused and added, "and see what he did at the Catching Ceremony!"

"But they said the week before that they had forgotten everything he did to them." The Chief said.

The man was silent for a while before he said:

"Your Highness, these are not the sort of things we forget."

The Chief was still not convinced. What was so outrageous about all these things as to arouse such a feeling of repulsion against Antony? Even after depriving him of his throne, they did not want to hear his name mentioned? Was it not an act of malicious injustice to use his reaction to justify their decision against him?

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Chapter Seven

IN THE morning of the day after the Chief had written and given the letter to be posted, the D.O. came to the palace and asked to speak to Ngobefuo and his closest associates in the administration of the tribe. When the men gathered Ngobefuo led them to an empty hut in the lower section of the palace, far from the Chief's chamber. When they were all ready to listen to the D.O. he announced:

"Your new Chief, Nchindia, does not like you at all. He does not want to rule. He wants to escape and go to meet a harlot in Sowa. He wants to call his brother Antony Nkoaleck to come back and rule in his place."

The people were alarmed, but remained silent. It was Ngobefuo who spoke:

"How does Goment know this?"

The D.O. did not answer at once. For a whole minute he was silent, looking intently from one elder to the other, while he allowed the effect of what he had just said to eat into their flesh like venom. Then pointing to Ntongntong he asked:

"What did the Chief ask you to go and do in the District Office yesterday?"

"He asked me to go and send a book for him," the man replied.

All eyes turned on him as though he had committed a felony by carrying out the Chief's orders without conferring with them. In any case, this was not the cause of the consternation. They were only horrified that there was indeed a basis for the disheartening disclosure.

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When the messenger took the letter to go and post as instructed by the Chief, the D.O. met him before he reached the District Office where he was to have posted it. The D.O. stopped to enquire from the man how they were getting on with the new Chief. The man told the D.O. that they were having many problems, but added that they were problems they expected because they knew that Nchindia would require a very long period of apprenticeship before actually ruling like any of his predecessors.

Asked where he was going to, the man had told the D.O. that he was taking a letter from the Chief to be posted. On looking at it the D.O. had been attracted by the address. From his experience with names he knew that the name Fey on the envelope definitely belonged to the coast and not Middle-Belt. Not Biongong. He imagined that she must be one of the Chief's paramours. After all, Nchindia had spent years in the coast and obviously must have had occasions to establish such relationships. The D.O. had asked the messenger to give him the letter, that he would save him the trouble by taking it back to be posted.

He had returned to his office with the letter and had decided to see its contents. Not that he suspected anything amiss. He had only imagined that he would find something in it for a good joke with the Chief one day when the storm in the latter's heart shall have subsided. Thus he had been mainly interested in knowing what place a woman from the Coastal Region occupied in the Chief's heart to the extent that she should be the very first person he would write to after his coronation. Once that was known he was to seal the letter again and post it as intended.

But what a surprise he had after reading it! He found himself thanking God for that careless act of curiosity which he thereafter converted into an administrative principle. He knew what part he had played in taking the throne from Antony and giving to Nchindia. He knew also that since

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that night the Elders held him in very intense disfavour for his interference.

Since he had managed to somehow convince them about the genuineness of his motives in effecting the change of succession, he found the letter a useful tool for reconciling with them. In the kind of interpretation he planned to place on the letter, he saw an opportunity to prove, if not reiterate to them, albeit insincerely, that he had always had the best interest of their tribe at heart. So he decided to come down himself to speak to them.

"Is that what the Chief said in the book, Goment?" Achiebefuo enquired worriedly.

The D.O. put his hand in his breast pocket, drew it out and held a letter before Ngobefuo. A temptation to laugh threatened to soil the gravity of the moment. Not only could Ngobefuo not read, but there was nobody in the whole palace who could do so except the Chief himself. When the D.O. held it towards Ngobefuo he stared at it for some time and, then, as if divining what had been written inside he said:

"This cannot happen." After a while he enquired again:

"Goment, you say he said what?"

The D.O. tore open the envelope and after going over it briefly again he took out the money enclosed, showed them and said:

"He says only Antony can be Chief. This is the money he wants to send for him to use for his transport to come here after he leaves the hospital. It is written here in black and white. The Chief said he will only go and live with harlots in Sowa."

"We shall give him a taste of the bitterness in our hearts," Ngobefuo said. "Give me that book."

The D.O. shook his head and said:

"Sit down, Ngobefuo."

"I have sat down," the man said, sitting down. "Nchindia

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should not be the one to make us look so small and foolish, Goment." When he was sure that the man had calmed down he addressed them:

"It is my duty as the District Officer to safeguard your interests, although you seem always to doubt it. I still know that I have the sacred duty to protect this tribe, and its interests. I know how painful it is for a child to come now and undo all that we have taken so much time to build. I say *no* to your decision to go to the Chief about this matter. Rather, I think you will have to make him believe that you know nothing about this letter."

There was silence. He stretched out the money and showed Ngobefuo.

"What, Goment?"

"Take this money," the D.O. insisted.

The man took it and then listened. "You will buy kola-nuts for him with it, "the D.O. said. "It seems he does not know what to do with his money."

Silence.

"You will just be silent," he went on. "A Chief who has said a thing of this nature, a Chief who has contemplated something of this sort, can do more. If we are too rash, we shall lose. You as the Elders of this tribe will do yourselves a very great harm if you attack him. It is too early. If you do that now, he will hate you and you will hate him too, there will be no meeting ground. It is enough and satisfactory for us now that we know his innermost thoughts. We shall only proceed step by step to frustrate his effort in that direction. When he finds that nothing is going the way he plans or wants, he might even think that it is God who is preventing him, and so give up trying. That is what we shall do."

The men agreed with him *in toto.* Then he reassured them:

"I promise you that so long as I remain here, your throne will never suffer any disgrace from anybody."

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Chapter Eight

THERE HAD always existed between the natives of Small Monje on the one hand and the Government and Roman Catholic Church on the other, a very great rift. Matters would long have come to a head, but the protracted illness of Fuo-ndee forced them to postpone their actions to a later date. It concerned their land. Several weeks after the interception of the Chief's letter the people no longer could bear the tormenting thoughts. Some twenty men came from the neighbouring villages to acquaint the Chief of their plans. They were led by Amos Ngangabe, the successor to his uncle Takala's property. He was now the head of the Takala family, one time owners of some of the best and largest lands in the whole principality of Small Monje. This was the one group that was most affected by the *New things*. They had been systematically cheated out of their possessions and driven to lead a degrading life in the hills.

In Nkokonoko Small Monje, a very hilly country, tradition made social status depend not only on birth but very much on how far down the valleys and plains a man built his house. Thus men of respect built in the valleys and on the plains where they were regarded as *begang-ale*. Strangers and slaves, called disparagingly the *Mmick-ale* bore the humiliation of building on the hill-slopes. They were believed to be the watchdogs of the tribe, and they warned the rest of the tribe in the event of an invasion. As a result of its aggressive past, Small Monje lived in perpetual fear of retaliatory invasions from its neighbours.

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When the first Missionaries came to the area they naturally chose the most fertile and most convenient places for settlement - the plains. This meant that it was to men like Takala that they first presented their case. The Takala's virtually controlled all the plains at the time. It was said that Takala gave the Mission a "palm of ground" where they built a small hut in which they usually gathered for prayers with more enlightened court clerks each time they came up from the coast.

Some years afterwards the Missionaries had decided to finally settle in Small Monje. From donations mainly from faithful Christians down the coast they had succeeded in putting up a magnificent building - according to the standards of the time. This was not done without the expected hazards of overstepping the original boundaries. Alarmed, Takala had complained, but that had changed nothing.

Later on a house was built for the reverend Father's servant, about a quarter of a kilometre away from the Father's own house. It was not long, disputes began to arise as to who owned or should own the piece of land spanning the small house of worship, the new quarters that had been built for the servants and the Father's house.

The Missionaries acted swiftly and wisely. Within a few months Takala was converted into the new faith and a week after his conversion he was made the catechist of his village and its environs. The quarrel died a natural death and the disputed land was made the site for a kitchen garden for the Fathers.

Three years afterwards the Missionaries decided to have a more permanent building for their worship. For the convenience of the natives who had to come from so far away the Fathers suggested that the site should be chosen half a kilometre from their house. That meant one kilometre from the village. The church was built. As in the first case,

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the land between the church and the Father's house became disputed territory. The Fathers disposed of this problem in their traditional, tactful manner. The disputed territory became the site for the first Mission primary school in the area. And so the mission proceeded, inching its way year after year into Takala's lands until before his death he had already lost more than half of what he once possessed.

When he died Ngangabe, his next-of-kin succeeded to the title as head of the family. He refused to be baptized. And when the Fathers attempted to make him the catechist even without baptism he refused. He announced in the market place that he had refused to be bound by the ropes which the Fathers had used to bind the hands of his uncle, making it impossible for him to resist their encroachments. He had been an ardent church-goer in the beginning, but now, to emphasize his hatred for the Fathers he withdrew from the faith and went back to continue his practice as traditional healer and exorcist.

Then came Father Preston, the man whose loathsome presence was a ceaseless criticism of all that they had always believed in. The man condemned not only in church as his predecessors did, but also in the market places and down in the palace of the Chief, their unshakable belief in witchcraft, idolatry, and the use of herbs for curing the sick. Barely one month after his arrival, Preston had gone not only into the villages to seek his converts as the others had done in the past, but had come right down to the palace to establish doctrine sessions. And on that first day he had said a lot of things which had made the old men feel terribly scandalized.

First of all he had talked about 'one man one wife.'

"If a man married one wife as you say," Achiebefuo had asked him, "and, may the gods forbid, she does not have a child, what will he do?"

"A child,' Preston explained, "is an accident of the relationship of marriage, not its purpose. Man marries for love. Nothing else."

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The people had considered that a form of madness. But he did not stop there. He spoke very bitterly against the possession of such heathen things as statues of false gods, charms and the like, that the only statue worth keeping was that of something he held attached to a ring of beads - what Ngobefuo remembered he called the statue of *Helly Melly** the mother of God"

"Which god?" Ngobefuo had asked him, and had gone further to tell him: "We have many gods; the god of rain, the god of sunlight, the god of planting, the god of harvesting, the god of women, the god of men, the god of the tribe. Which god?" he asked

curiously.

"There is only one God," the Reverend Father had told them.

"Like ***Akeukeuor***?" Ngobefuo asked.

"What is that?" the Priest wondered.

"The god of our land," Ngobefuo told him and then narrated to him in detail the history of the statue. When he finished, the Father preached to them to discard all those pernicious beliefs and take to the Church.

Ngobefuo would not be swayed from his own beliefs. He had made plain to Preston that if he wanted anybody to go to his Church from the palace he should come and build one under ***Akeukeuor***. As soon as that was done they would go there not only once a week as he had urged but every day of the week. The two men had parted, condemning each other.

But Father Preston had not gone to sleep. From the palace he had gone to the village where he had singled out the traditional doctors for his harangue. There he was said to have assailed and cursed their practices as never before, going even into the unprecedented and embarrassing extent of

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entering the doctors' *ateungs* and coming out unscathed and without the traditional *Ntoe* being squeezed into his eyes.

If Preston differed from his predecessors in the annoying extent of his ardour and excesses, he however, still followed their footsteps in systematically grabbing their land. He set up one project after the other, creating neutral grounds, then claiming them *in the name of the Lord*.

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The coming of the Missionaries was not the people's only worry. Nevertheless, they found that fact alone unbearable. The Government too had arrived. Small Monje needed a District office to replace the defunct N.A. office, the administrative body which had governed the tribes for generations. It was merely a more elevated title for the Council of Elders because it operated only within the walls of the palace, and its members were mainly the Chief's Elders. The District Office found the room in the Chief's palace inconvenient for its activities which were to include the administration of all the tribes under the paramount Chief's jurisdiction.

A site was chosen in the plains for the construction of the office building, thereby driving more of the title-holders of the tribe into the hills, causing them to quarrel with people to whom they had long ago sold the land. Houses, shrines and farms were demolished without apologies. Compensation in cash was promised, but never paid.

The necessity for opening motorable roads became an urgent priority. The roads, too, had to follow the most convenient portions of the terrain - the valleys and plains. A team of people came from the coast called *Surveyors*. They cut down houses and farms and planted cement pillars all over the villages. The natives refused to succumb to this madness without a fight. They beat, wounded and killed them in tens and twenties. But the Government stepped in and reacted with blood-curdling swiftness. Natives involved in the outrages against the Government were arrested and

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tortured in market places and then sent to the coast for imprisonment. They never returned.

To those who accepted the "new things" with resignation compensation was again promised. Even if the Government kept its words (which it never did!), no amount of compensation was ever going to be enough to make up for the total loss of social esteem on the part of those who had lost their land. They simply wanted back the land.

At the ceremony arranged to welcome the new District Officer, they presented a petition through Ngobefuo. Fuo-ndee was already on his death-bed. In the opinion of all the Government officials who attended that ceremony from the coast and other nearby districts, the petition was silly. It only indicated to them how narrow-minded the natives were and how decided they were to live in that primitive state. Though the District Officer did not show his disappointment for its intended purpose, he had told them:

"The Government will look into all these things that have been said, as soon as it is practicable." Later in his speech he explained: "The roads are to help you all, especially the farmers. They will pass in front of your houses and farms, so that you will no longer need to travel hundreds of miles to sell your produce. Cooperative societies and Credit Unions will be formed by you and for your own good. Money will be loaned out to buying agents in need. Drugs will be made available for the health of your livestock. Fertilizers will be made available for you to improve your soil and productivity. If you want to benefit from the institution of the District Office and the physical presence of the Government here, this is your chance. You must make a huge sacrifice - in terms of money, property and manpower. Everybody should put his shoulder to the plough and let us help build this nation."

That was years ago. The sacrifices had been made as the D.O. had demanded, but the Government had not as much as fulfilled a word of its old promises to look into their

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problems. Instead, at the death of Fuo-ndee, as the Elders put it, "The Goment had put its hand between the tree and its bark," forcing them to change the words and choice of the dead Chief. A new team of surveyors came, this time accompanied by armed soldiers, and started cutting down houses again from an entirely different angle, making the same promises of compensation. Where was all that going to end, the people wondered.

The dying Fuo-ndee had left the solution of the problem in the hands of his chosen successor Antony Nkoaleck, and whom he knew would be capable of solving it. Now the responsibility had inevitably devolved on Nchindia. Ngobefuo knew that it was too early for the Chief to be involved in such matters. Everybody else was convinced that it was not too early for the Chief to be put in the know of the canker worm devouring their hearts. They ought not to wait, lest he should hear it from a different source.

The men from the villages were led into the Chief's presence and there they unfolded their grief to him. They wanted his opinion, not his decision. Thereby they would know how long they would have to wait. Or if he was in favour of immediate action, how soon that was to be and in what manner they were to react. When they finished talking, the Chief said:

"I have not settled down enough to begin to look into things like that. And even if I had started, these are not the sort of things I can query the D.O. about. The roads were for the good of the whole tribe."

"Did you say that it is for the good of the tribe that they have destroyed our farms and houses, Your Highness?" Ngobefuo asked.

The Chief refused to say anything more. He had the impression that they had merely come to tease him. After a while Ngobefuo spoke again:

"It is as we expected. We did not come to tell His Highness that we have no legs to go and see Goment ourselves."

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2

They resolved to go and speak to the D.O. It was a Saturday, and they knew they would certainly find him at home. The road was long and the sun scorching. Everyone had time to think about what to say to the D.O. on the issue as they went along.

They all hated the way things had turned out. Life was fast changing, and for the worst. They had given the first Missionaries a palm of ground, but now they had acquired so much land that they had started selling some back to the natives, as though they were the original owners of the land. How was that possible?

These new surveyors who came and started cutting down things left and right! Did they not know that the Government had never given one white franc to compensate those whose property was destroyed so many years ago? They had cut down farms and later abandoned them to go and start cutting down more farms in other areas. Why? If they were not yet sure of the direction of the road, why did they not wait? Why did they start the destruction? And now they were saying that compensation would be given only to those through whose farms the *real* road would pass. Which was the *real* road? What was a man to do whose farm had been destroyed? He would have to starve to death because the road which necessitated the destruction of his farm was not the real road? Why should their farms be used as testing grounds?

Again, why did they not put the pillars in front of the houses of people like Ngangabe and Ogamanga whose farms had been seized by the Mission and District Office? Did

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they not say that in the making of the new road these people would be placed on the greatest advantage? And had not these same people given 20.000 francs each as contributions for development? Instead of planting the pillars in front of their houses as promised, they had gone and planted them again in their farms. Did this not mean that even the little farms which had been sustaining them would be destroyed too? Ngangabe, the man who once had the yam and the knife had now become a beggar on his own land. It was now going to make crooks, nonentities, lazy people like Ndon-akuo and Tetieuonki proud of never doing anything to help themselves. What had they done that they were the first to have cement pillars near their compounds? What had they to sell at the coast?

Ntchep Lekang and others were caught and taken to prison because they were curing their brothers with leaves shown to them by their grandfathers. They wanted their people to go to the hospital. They said their doctors should cure people. Where were the medicines in the hospital? Was a sick man going to be cured just by looking at the white walls of the hospital building? That was not right. Their own doctors would continue to give them medicines until the Government decided to bring medicines to his hospital.

Some years ago, they talked of something called "*coplatif sosaty**," which brings Government money to the village for buying produce and sending to the coast. How many years ago was that?

They still kept their produce in their houses, at the risk of rain and thieves. And where did the Government keep all the money they were deceived into contributing for the construction of the place? They talked of fertilizers, the wonderful thing which they said when poured on coffee or cocoa, would make their branches touch the ground because of the healthy fruits they would bear. Had people not sold

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their goats and cows to go and buy it at the cut-throat price of ten thousand francs per tin? Did they not say in the beginning that it would be given free of charge? And now they poured it even on the leaves - the mouths of the plant, and were the plants not drying up just as before, and even faster?

They did not want this D.O. They wanted only the white man who came by a bush path and returned by a bush path without complaining; the white man who ruled them with iron hands; the white man who hanged offenders at the coast; the white man who forced them to go and work on plantations, and fight and lose their lives in distant wars, the causes of which they were never told and never cared to know; that white man who did not interfere with their beliefs and practices and who allowed them to do things their own way. That was the type of D.O. they wanted. Not this one who caused so much suffering and confusion.

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3

The D.O. and the Reverend Father often exchanged visits. And as if the gods willed it to emphasize the point that the pair constituted a conspiracy to disinherit them, Father Preston was in the D.O.'s house when the villagers made that fateful journey there.

The two men were sitting on the veranda playing a game of chess. A tray of whisky, gin, brandy, soda and lime stood beside them. The D.O.'s wife was in the parlour helping the children to put together a set of toys she had pulled apart. Macbrown, the dog, was lying calmly near the D.O.'s left foot. As soon as the people appeared in the distance he looked in their direction and then lowered his head again and continued with his game. When he was sure that they had reached the open gate he quietly unhooked the chain from the dog's neck and tapped it twice on the head. The dog looked at him. He stared suddenly in the direction of the approaching crowd and then at the dog. It got the message and shot out like an arrow to chase them away. He knew how much the natives feared the dog, but he took very great pleasure in sending it after them each time he saw anybody from the village in his compound.

It was then that Preston turned to look at them. When the dog almost pounced on the screaming villagers, he rose and whistled to it to come back. He then asked his wife to chain it in the parlour, which was another way of restricting the victors only to the veranda. The old men waited until they were sure that the dog was secured in its chain. Then they began to trickle noiselessly into the yard, refusing to

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answer the policeman who tried in vain to question why they were coming to see the D.O. Besides, the D.O. himself had asked him to let them come in. He felt he had already won their confidence over the issue of the Chief's letter. So there was no cause for alarm. In fact, he even thought they were coming to thank him for his timely intervention.

He very reluctantly suspended his game and turned to listen to them. He received them at the veranda and they too did not insist on going any further. Very impatiently, he listened to the object of their visit. Three men spoke, from three different points of view, but on the same subject-matter - that the foreigners must go. Ngobefuo was the last to speak. The D.O. interrupted nobody. When they had finished talking he asked:

"Is that all?"

The people answered: "That is all Goment."

He came, and, standing directly in front of them, he said:

"Ngobefuo, you are the most ungrateful people to be found on the surface of this earth. We have left our homes thousands of miles away to come here and make you come out of your darkened valleys and see some light. And this is your reward to us: that we should pack out of your land, that the road should have passed in front of everybody's house, that it should have been dug without touching crops, that you will contribute nothing more towards the building of schools for the benefit of your own children, that you will withdraw the children from school because we are teaching them bad doctrine." He paused. "Look at the dispensary that has been built for you, with Government money. It is second to none in black Africa. Look at the Cathedral that has been put up for you here - with money contributed by fellow human beings - real Christians, people who have been shown the light and who are grateful about it. And they gave this money willingly, they do not expect any payment from you. How many of such churches as this

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can you find anywhere else? We live here at the risk of our lives, at the mercy of malaria and typhoid, at the precarious mercy of hostile natives. And this is your reward to us, that we should leave your land."

"Yes, Goment," Ngangabe sputtered boldly, too angry to be cautious. "We were living happily before you came, but now we are not even...."

"Shut up your mouth!" the D.O. shouted in tempestuous rage. Then he paused for a while to be able to bear the insult of being interrupted so rudely. He fixed a cruel look on Ngangabe for a whole minute and then turning to the rest enquired gravely: "Am I to conclude from all this nonsense that you people have gained nothing whatsoever from our presence here?"

"We have not Goment," Ngangabe defied him the second time, drawing everybody's worried attention to himself. The D.O. stopped talking and ordered two officers who stood by to arrest Ngangabe and lock him up in the dog house. They seized him at once and as they were dragging him away the D.O. warned them:

"Things just cannot be done and said this way to me. Nnno, they cannot." Then he resumed: "You talk of leaving as if any of us is happy to be here. As if we gained something from being...."

"You are happy, Goment," Ngangabe struggled to say his last word before a kick and a slap from the policeman showed him which way to go with his mouth shut.

The rest stood shocked and helpless as he was dragged away. They did not know what to do because they had not foreseen such a thing. They came bare-handed. If it came to a fight they could not stand against guns. The D.O. went on:

"Whatever way you look at it, let me tell you for the very last time that, if after this extent of making you what you could never have been without us, and then you are not satisfied, that you are being cheated, that you do not

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want us, you will be the ones to leave this land. We won't go. We have come to stay, the Government and the Mission."

"That we shall leave our land"?

"You will leave your land if you are not satisfied with our work."

"We?"

"*You*, if you are not satisfied with our work."

"This land of ours?" Ngobefuo went on, trembling with fury. The D.O. said nothing. He was standing near his seat. He looked at them for some time, and growling in his throat he said almost to himself:

"Toothless bulldogs." Then he sat down to resume his chess game.

Just before the people came, the wily Father Preston had captured the D.O.'s queen, and was actually scheming to checkmate his king at the next move. When the D.O. sat back and asked him to play he inadvertently picked up a pawn which he thought would end the match and, instead of playing, held it between his fingers and continued to stare into space. He did not place it down and announce "check" as he ought. He sat quietly, saying nothing to the D.O. who urged him to play, thinking only of what might be going on in the people's minds - a point which did not seem to tickle the D.O. While he still sat back Ngobefuo asked:

"Goment, where is our brother? What has he done?"

"Were you not here?"

"Goment, we were here. What did he do?"

"He has insulted my person and authority. You all heard him"

"We did not hear him. We saw you ask your men to take him and lock him. We are waiting for him. We came with him."

"If you came with him and you allowed him to insult the District Officer - the representative of the President of this Republic in Nkokonoko Small Monje, I am afraid you will

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have to go without him. The District Officer had decided that Ngangabe will remain in cell until such a time that he will learn to respect authority. "Don't take my leniency for weakness....Father play the game," he ended up, poured himself a drink and looked expectantly at Father Preston. Preston sat still.

"We shall not go without him," Ngobefuo said.

"Then you stay here. After all you say you are in your land. Sleep there if you like."

There was silence, then Ndenwontio called out in an injured voice:

"Goment, have you not heard that we want our brother?" The D.O.'s carefree and insulting attitude seemed that instance to draw from their old bones all the combative instincts with which they were born, and which their old age had rendered dormant and almost non-existent. Every nerve seemed to cry out on them to fall on that table, seize those bottles of hot drinks and blow out their brains with them. Half their number was made up of very old men, out of which only five of them had ever been counted among the fighting men of the tribe, even in their youth. They were not armed for anything beyond a peaceful compromise. They had come like women, without even a stick in case a snake strayed into their path. That was very sad indeed. That was not the way to visit an enemy.

He walked across to ask Ngobefuo to come away with him and the others. The men came together, conferred for some time and were already moving out of the yard when Father Preston asked:

"Martin, don't you see the seed-plot of an uprising in this?"

"Father, that is what we Africans like - to be pushed around. To be forced at every pace to respect authority. We never listen to the voice of reason. That's what they want..."

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"Free that man," Preston insisted. "Let him go with them. Let us not give them another reason for coming back here. See how they are going away."

"They should at least know that there is only one voice in this land - the District Officer. This is, in fact, most strange. This is not the first place I have administered as the District Officer. They are awful..."

"Yes, but let the man go with them," Father Preston repeated.

The D.O. finally agreed and sent immediately for the man's release. But it took another hour before Ngangabe left the place. When the officer came and opened the door he refused to go out. The D.O. had vowed never to be afraid of any threats from the people. But when he heard of the man's determination to remain in there, and when he considered that the people had talked together before going away, he took fright and sent his driver to go after the others and ask them to come back for their brother.

Since they had not yet arrived at any definite line of action to be taken against the D.O. they bore the inconvenience and the disgrace and returned to take Ngangabe out. But Ngangabe thought their return was an act of cowardice. He saw no reason why they could not go back to the village and raise an alarm that he had been seized, beaten and imprisoned in the D.O.'s house. He said there was no other way of rousing the whole tribe to madness against the D.O. The whole tribe was then sure to march on him and make an end of him and whatever he stood for.

But some people saw this as too abrupt. He was told that they were already contemplating such an action and that it needed very careful planning since it would involve taking the D.O. completely by surprise. It was only on this promise that Ngangabe yielded.

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When they went away again, the D.O. turned his eyes back to the chess board which meant more to him than any complaint from any pack of wretches called Elders. He watched Father Preston finger the piece he had picked up, lowering his hand gradually until he announced:

"Check and check-mate."

"From where Father?" the D.O. enquired.

"From...Oh, I am sorry please." He had made a mistake. He had not picked up the piece he had really intended to play. He tried to correct it.

"Touch and play, Father," the D.O. told him. He could not overlook the correction of an error which was so obviously to his disadvantage.

"What does that mean?" Preston asked.

"That you play only the piece you have lifted."

"But it was with this piece that I was going to check you," he pointed to a Rook on the board.

"I know. But this is the one you lifted, and you certainly cannot check with it from that distance."

"So what are you saying?"

"That you must play the one you touched or we call it a draw game," he said with an haughty laugh, glad that for once he had been able to out-wit the white man at his own game. Father Preston refused to call it a draw. The D.O. refused to allow him to replay. So the game ended unconcluded.

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Chapter Nine

THEY RETURNED from the D.O.'s house as if from the funeral of a very dear friend. It was a depressing journey. But it gave them, if only in an informal way an opportunity to reconsider and even more seriously the best means of taking out that very prickly thorn which had found itself into the inside of the tribe. They had all been witnesses to what had happened. They had come merely to complain as one brother would to the other to step off if he found that the other was standing on his toes. What had happened? Ngangabe had been seized and locked up in the dog's house - without cause! And, although that did not make him any more innocent, the white man had kept silent. White men were now hearing from the D.O., an ordinary black-man like themselves. That was very good. But why should a black-man refuse to listen to another black-man, even when he was standing on his corns?

What chance had they? Indeed what chance? They had made a mistake. The D.O. and Father had come with wax to sit on their land. What other force was there that would melt wax short of fire? They had made a mistake. They had come like women to confront an all-powerful and uncompromising adversary - without even a blade on anybody, without even a stick! Instead, they had come with their pipes. They would have come in such a way that as soon as they said a word and shook their hands in the air, the D.O. would understand what they were talking about. He would know that we had come to *tell* him, not to *discuss* with him.

They will never repeat such a mistake. They had not foreseen that kind of thing. When next they come they would

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come like the real men that they were supposed to be. They would come ready to catch not only the D.O.'s dog and his master, but also that policeman who had kicked their brother on the buttocks. And they would also lock them in that room. It wouldn't be too long. It will be soon. The following week. They would explain what had happened to their kinsmen in the other villages at the next *ale-assaa* so that the whole tribe would come out on the appointed day. It will no longer be an affair for only a handful of men as if nobody else was feeling the pinch of the intruders' irritating and painful presence.

But there were moderates! Had they forgotten? Did "big goment" not say on the day of the installation of the D.O. that if they ever had any complaints to make they should ask a court clerk to write everything down and type it and give it to the D.O. who would sign and send to him? They must first of all write to the D.O. But was the D.O. going to accept to sign and send something forward which he knew affected his presence there? That was not possible. He would not. What then were they to do? They would write directly to "big goment" and complain. Understanding and appreciating their problem he might withdraw the D.O. and whoever they hated.

But did "big goment" not say that he would never attend to any complaint that did not bear the signature of the D.O.? What were they to do? There ought to be a way. Indeed there must be a way. And that way lay in the calling of a general meeting. There they would decide what to say to "big goment" through the D.O. They would give the man a month to reply. Then after that date, if he did not reply, the tribe would march on the D.O. and Father and chase them out of their land.

That general meeting was postponed week after week, month after month, mainly because of the very disappointing conduct of their Chief. It had become the sole focus of attention, demanding immediate correction.

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Chapter Ten

FOR A long time following the writing of the letter to Celina Fey, the Chief remained very cheerful. But after six weeks he had not received any reply. He began to feel disturbed again, and to wonder whether it was not wiser for him to write directly to Antony himself. If he sent him another letter explaining his case, he thought, that would strengthen Celina's argument. Even if the bearer of Celina's letter had trekked to the coast, he estimated, he should have reached Sowa by the hour he was thinking about it. Celina would certainly have met Antony already. So, one day, he decided to write this other letter to Antony:

My Own Dearest Brother;

I have done you very great wrong. I know that, but please listen to me. I know that I am the one who has caused you to have that accident which has brought you to the hospital there like that. I know that because of me your wife died. But I beg you to listen to me.

I have already sent one woman to you by name Celina Fey, with transport money to come and see you. I told her that I am too ashamed to write to you directly because I think that you will not like to read anything from me. But listen to me. My brother, I did not take your crown. They forced it on me. I ran to the bush but they caught me and forced me to say that I agree to be Chief. Brother, if you can still remember all the good things which you did for me, do not believe that I can take your crown. To tell you how serious I am about my love and respect for you, I want to make a promise which I am swearing in the name of all the gods to keep. I am promising you that as soon as the 21 months which they say I shall spend in this palace are over, I will pack my things away from here and come and bring you back to

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be Chief as you ought to be. You are the only one who can be Chief of this tribe now. If They do not accept it like that they will have to choose another Chief. And they will have to do so because I will only tell them that when I shall have escaped from here. I cannot be Chief when you are nothing. Who am I?

This is 10.000 francs to buy medicines for your accident. If you still need more money write and tell me. As soon as I begin to get the Government money I shall take good care of you. Please, brother, do not let this thing bother you very much because you are still sick. Just try and get well. If you get well before the 21 months finish, write and tell me and I will send you money to come here. We shall correct the wrong that these stupid old people have tried to do.

I am promising you all that I have said, I am begging you from the bottom of my heart that you should only write one word, only one word, to say you read my letter. Then I shall be able to sleep. I am sick to think how you are feeling about me. Please, only one line, only one word from you.

Your bad brother who is asking you to forgive him,
Alexander Nchindia.

He sealed the envelope and addressed it:

MR ANTONY Nkoaleck
(Graduate, Patient)
Kepemnlo General Hospital
Kepemnlo.

He then gave the letter to Ntongntong for it to be posted. Once again a period of great relief followed as he felt he had written to his brother who would certainly write back soon. But when he still had not even heard from Celina depression set in again.

"Oh me!" he broke out pining and whining. That had become a way of life to him. "I wrote to my brother months ago," he cried. "Two letters! Six letters would have travelled

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between my brother and myself, between the time I wrote and now. But see, nothing." He called for the man who took the letters to arrange for the posting and when he asked him whether he had them posted the man said:

"I did, Your Highness. All the two letters."

That was not true. When the Chief gave him the second letter he went straight to Ngobefuo and reported. The latter gathered his brothers and they went to the D.O. to find out what was in it. Anxious for a reconciliation with them the D.O. received them very well. Then he read the letter and unfolded to them the dangerous conspiracy involving the Chief and Antony.

Once more he advised perpetual patience and caution. There was only one step to take: the Chief must never be allowed to stir from Small Monje after his twenty-one months of confinement. Not even for medical reasons, if it ever came to that. He used the tax money which the Chief had diverted for his brother to get drinks which they drank to forget the problems that existed between them and work for the betterment of the tribe. The betterment of the tribe had become synonymous with keeping a watchful eye on the Chief's movements.

But the Chief, on his own part suspected nothing. He blamed only himself. "My brother cannot reply me. I am a beast. He cannot write to a beast like myself. Am I his brother? The same man who removed the chair from under him so that he fell into mud from which he will never climb out? He cannot write to me. Antony is not a fool."

When he lay down, the scene in the hospital in which Antony had received his letter built up itself in his mind's eye. The letter had reached the hospital and a nurse had taken it to him.

"Who here is Antony - a graduate patient?" she had asked from one ward to the other.

"I am the one," Antony had said.

"Here is a letter for you, " the nurse had announced.

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Antony had taken the letter and examined the handwriting. Then discovering that it was from Small Monje and that it was Nchindia's writing he had said to the nurse:

"This letter is from a brother of mine, a junior brother. One I taught how to read and write. One I taught how to live. And yet the very one who turned against me, seizing the throne which my father had given to me, causing me to have the accident that has reduced me to this condition! He is Chief now, and I am nothing. And he wants me to read from him. He sent a woman here whom I drove away. If he wants to talk to me, this is how I shall always listen."

He had torn the letter into bits even without opening the envelope. And why not, the Chief asked himself. Nobody in his right senses will read from a man like himself. He knew or thought he knew what Antony must have told Celina. He must have humiliated her in front of all the other women. And because she knew that he was the cause of it all, she must have decided never to write to him again. That was what must have happened. That was why nobody would write to him.

He turned, sat up, turned the back of the mirror which bore Antony's picture and stared at it. Then he addressed it very solemnly:

"Brother, I am innocent. It was not my fault. Please, answer me. I am not what you think I am. I am still what you once knew me to be - your honest brother. I want to come to you, but they have tied my hands. Please, answer me."

He rose as if he had spoken to Antony himself and went to lean at the little window facing the front part of his chamber. He placed his folded hands on the sill and let his head lie on them. There were goats and sheep and fowls eating and playing about freely in the yard. He stared uncomprehendingly at them, wondering how they could be so cheerful and free in a place where he stood a complete prisoner.

Within a few minutes some six or seven men were seen coming towards the house. He easily identified three of them as judges of the Customary Court.

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What new decision could they have taken that they were coming to impose on him, he wondered. When they greeted him he answered with a silent nod and then continued to stare outside with empty unseeing eyes.

They entered and sat down. They had come to tell him that the Customary Court of the tribe had sat down and decided that Angelina, the Chief's wife was to be sent back to her parents, for a number of reasons.

After the Chief had been caught and crowned, he had been made to understand that the tradition demanded that he would taste a little from every dish that every woman brought to him. After that he could give it away to his men. That first week he had made an encouraging effort. But as his mind grew more and more disturbed by the fate of his brother, Antony, he lost interest in everything. When persuaded, he would only dip one finger in every dish and then ask them to take them away.

The Elders were not satisfied. They told him that all the women in the Palace were not all of equal importance, and that there were some amongst them whose food he was by tradition bound to eat first. The Chief in turn told them that it was his relationship with any woman that would determine whether he would taste the food or not.

He continued to do it his own way, dipping his finger into five consecutive dishes without even stopping to flatter the woman by licking the finger. The women and the Elders found this insulting to their positions in the palace. When the people complained further the Chief totally refused to eat the food of any other woman except that of his first wife, Angelina. This was what brought matters to a crisis.

Stories began to circulate that the woman had used charms on the Chief to make him love her and detest the other women. The Customary Court judges consulted the witch-doctors and they confirmed the rumours as true. The judges then began to go into the parentage of the woman. Their discovery was startling: Apart from the fact that a

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long history of witchcraft was associated with her family, it was proved that her Father was a direct son of a slave. Tradition could not therefore allow her to be the wife of their Paramount Chief. Numerous reports had been received that this same Angelina had fought with and beaten several of the Chief's women of respect.

They were coming to tell the Chief that she was to leave the palace that same night. They were also coming to tell the Chief that a general meeting must be called as soon as possible to decide which method they were going to employ to chase out the D.O. and the Reverend Father. The Chief decided to answer them first on the issue of the general meeting. He told them:

"When you came to ask me to go with you to tell the D.O. to go away, I tried to let you people see that it was not a thing that could be done. You did not listen to me. You told me that you had feet. You went. Have you sent him away?"

There was silence.

"Now you talk of a general meeting to decide how to drive him away, if by this you are asking my opinion, then I say again, I do not approve of any such thing. If you summon it I will not be there. But I do not stop you from doing what you like. I do not stop you from holding the meeting. The only thing I shall tell you is that you should not drag me into it."

The people nodded and told him that they had heard him. They asked him about the point of the woman. He told them:

"Angelina will not go. She will not leave, she is my wife. I did not marry her because I was to become the Chief. If now you come to tell me that she is not only the daughter of a slave but a slave herself, it is not my fault. If you had any value for my future and happiness you should have guided me the way you guided the other princes. You chose wives for them. You should not have allowed me to choose a wife, marry her and have children with her before coming

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to tell me that she is not the right woman. I have married her and can't leave her till I die."

"When is that?" Ngobefuo teased him.

"Whenever you like. Death will not mean anything to me."

There was silence.

Ngobefuo knew it was just a joke he had cracked to water down the insult. Now talking seriously he enquired:

"Is His Highness counting these things?" Ngobefuo asked after a long silence.

"What things?"

"His mistakes. It seems as if His Highness only chooses to do the things this tribe abhors."

"Like what?"

"We came to him last month with the case of Anyakeng, the son of this royal line who was accused wrongly by the sub-Chief of Oma. That Anyakeng was to marry his daughter by force because he impregnated her."

"I still say he must," the Chief said. "He slept with her and agreed that he did."

"But even the girl herself said that it was only once."

The Chief looked away contemptuously.

"Is His Highness still saying again that a man can impregnate a woman just by sleeping with her once?"

"Once is enough," the Chief told them. "I said so before Ngobefuo tried in vain to explain things to the Chief:

"No, His Highness. A man sleeps with a woman for nine moons, and then he gives her the child. Not once. We told His Highness that the judges had decided that Anyakeng was not guilty and that Oma was just trying to disgrace this tribe."

"And I told you that I had not started trying cases, but that since you asked me I had to give you my opinion, which was that Anyakeng was guilty. If the people of Oma took a lawyer they would win, and that would bring greater disgrace to the crown. If Anyakeng cared for the disgrace which you people are now talking about, he should not have slept with her. He should not have impregnated her."

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"He did not impregnate her."

"He did. And I say again that if you are asking my opinion, Anyakeng will give the parents of the girl five tins of oil, and five tins to this throne too."

"And then he will still marry her?" Ndenwontio asked.

"I had long said so," the Chief told them.

Ngobefuo put aside his pipe and sitting himself upright he addressed the Chief:

"His Highness, nobody is God. Even the hands of a potter can sometimes shake. We know that in all things we have always believed in the judgement of His Highness. But we do not understand how the judgment of His Highness, with his feet still in water, can be more right than that of those whose knowledge of the ways of our people has never been in doubt. The judges are men of respect in the whole tribe. If His Highness has no confidence in them, if he thinks they are not doing their duty well, let him dismiss them and choose those he wants."

"I don't have powers to dismiss anybody. I chose nobody."

"But you have powers to cancel their decision."

"I don't know."

"We know, and we are telling you."

"But I don't agree. They can take any decision and punish anybody they like, without asking me. I will say nothing."

"Then how are you our Chief?"

"I don't know. You chose me."

Silence.

"If they take any decision and tell me, and I find them wrong according to me, I shall never agree with them."

That ended the talk. The people went away, determined never to consult their Chief again on any important decision about the tribe.

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Chapter Eleven

ONE DAY the Chief came into his room and found the mirror which bore the picture of Antony at the back lying in broken pieces on the floor beside his bed. At first he thought he might have unknowingly caused it to drop as he walked out. When he bent down to inspect it he discovered that it had been dashed to the ground deliberately, and that the picture at the back had been taken away.

His wife could not tell who did it because she had also gone out. Ntongntong who was supposed to take care of the house claimed that he was absent from the palace when it happened. The Chief himself had gone to the latrine and, as usual, he spent over one hour admiring or rather gazing at the pigs chasing the lumps of excrement which he allowed to fall from his bowels down onto them in the fence.

He spoke angrily, and, at length, to Ntongntong and then ordered him to go round at once and summon an important meeting in the *Ndie-ndee* for a full-scale investigation to be undertaken for the discovery of the miscreant. The man bore all the insults the Chief poured on him and the rest of the tribe very patiently, and then went round to deliver the message.

The Elders would not stir out of their huts. They did not care about who did it. Why had the offender stopped only at the mirror? He should have included the Chief's skull, so that he would know what they meant when they said the tribe hated a man. Ntongntong should go back and tell the Chief who sent him that the *Ndie-ndee* was too sacred a place for people like them who knew the tradition so well

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to go into it and display such madness as discussing such things as broken mirrors and stolen pictures of a man the tribe had vowed to hate.

The Chief was powerless before them in this matter. For months after that incident there was only one prayer he made to God every night before he went to bed: That God should preserve his life until that day when his confinement would end so that he could go and look for his brother and tell him how much he had suffered in his name.

But fate stood directly in his way. Although he had never been told about it, Antony had long died.

The Biongong Almanac for the year 1966 had been published in Likume. As the practice required, a copy was sent to every paramount Chief in Biongong. When Chief Nchindia's copy was received the Elders did not show it to him.

This had nothing to do with the grievance that existed between them, it was just that no Chief had ever shown any interest in it. Whenever a copy was got, it was put on the wall in the *Ndie-ndee* for anybody who cared to have a look at the pictures. The Chief was strolling in that hall one day when he found it. He stood there to admire it.

At the top, at the highest rung between the Head of State and the Provincial Governor were the nine paramount Chiefs of Biongong - in full traditional regalia. Chief Nchindia commanded the very enviable position of being nearest to the Head of State.

That did not impress him as it ought to. He ran his eyes quickly down the column of characters to the right until they came to rest on his uncle Marcus Anuse who happened to be the Vice-President of the Biongong Elements in Likume. In that picture he was standing in front of his new house with his hands on his car. At the bottom left hand corner was Kwen-woh, the President of the group in Likume. He was standing in front of his cocoa store with several lorries in the background. His bulldog was sitting in

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front of him. The Chief turned away once more with great irritation, and then he began to scrutinize the centre of the paper.

There were several pictures of dancing groups, agricultural groups, choir groups and the like. That was not what he expected to see. He shook his head and shifted his gaze to the lower section. There was a very large group picture of the Biongong Teacher's Union. He studied that too for a long time and turned to the Young Farmer's Club. In the centre the president of the club stood feeding his chickens from his palms, to show absolute control over the farm. The Chief ran his eyes over the whole almanac again just to be sure that he really had not seen the one thing he had hoped to find. No fewer than fifty personalities had featured in the almanac. The Chief was still standing there pondering over something when Ntongntong came up and stood behind him. He was surprised that it interested the Chief so much.

"When was this thing put up here?" the Chief asked him.

"Long time, His Highness."

The Chief smiled to himself and asked:

"And you did not care to show me before putting it up here?"

The man remained silent. The Chief stared at the almanac for a while and then asked him:

"Has everybody looked at it very well?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Anything?"

"What have they said about it?"

The man did not answer immediately. He looked first at the Chief's melancholic face, and then at the paper on the wall. He expected to discern a clue to the full import of the question, but he failed.

"They say it is very good Your Highness."

"They who?" the Chief enquired in a severe tone.

"All. Everybody, Your Highness."

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The Chief tore down the almanac, took a few steps towards his chamber, stopped, turned round and said:

"Call my fathers Ngobefuo, Achiebefuo and Ndenwontio. I want to talk to them. About this almanac."

He walked off. The man followed him to the doorsteps and asked:

"What does His Highness want to ask them?"

"Go and tell them that I want to see them." So saying the Chief ordered him and went in.

The man hesitated for some time and then left.

When the old men came the Chief was leaning on the window, looking outside. He did not turn to look at them. He did not greet them, and they too did not greet him. In the light of what the two parties believed and knew about each other, that gruelling formality had long ceased to have any meaning. When he was sure that they had all sat down he moved with backward steps to the centre of the floor, withdrew the almanac from his armpit and offered to Ndenwontio.

Ngobefuo pushed it away, telling him that everyone of them had seen it a hundred times.

The Chief thought it a waste of time and energy to ask why he had not been shown the paper when it was sent. He asked:

"That you people have seen this kind of thing very many times?"

"What kind of thing?"

"My brother's picture is not here? Why is Antony's picture not here?"

"Which Antony?"

"I don't have two brothers called Antony," the Chief told Ngobefuo.

As soon as he said this Ngobefuo turned away from him and started pulling at his pipe, clouding the room with thick suffocating columns of smoke, daring the Chief to protest.

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It was Ndenwontio who broke the silence with a lame excuse:

"That paper was not made here Your Highness. It was made..."

"Even if it was made in Jericho, you people knew which pictures were to be taken. You once asked for my picture which I see here..."

"And so?" Ngobefuo asked the Chief, jerking to attention once more.

"I want to know exactly why my brother's picture was not included here. Ngobefuo used his spittle to put out his pipe which he placed under his stool, ready to talk. But it was Ndenwontio who spoke:

"They could not get your brother's picture."

"Why could they not? Whom did they ask? They could only steal picture from my room."

"Who are the *they* that His Highness is referring to?" Ngobefuo asked.

"You," the Chief gestured to all of them. "I am talking about all of you."

There was very long silence. Ngobefuo absorbed the insult calmly. He felt his pipe to make sure that it was completely cold, then he picked it up and fitted it into the folds of his loin cloth, and stuck the remainder of the tobacco above his ear. Then he sat up, cleared his throat and told the Chief:

"That paper is not for the dead. It is for the living."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they could not put your brother's picture because he is dead."

The Chief sat up with a start

"What?"

Ngobefuo did not speak again.

"That who is dead?"

"Nkoaleck died in the 12th moon last year," Ngobefuo said with icy cold indifference.

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The Chief tried to speak but his mouth dropped open and nothing came out. He felt paralysed. He could not even move a limb where he sat. He knew they meant what they had said. When he regained his power of speech he managed to enquire:

"How long ago is that?"

"Let His Highness count that himself," Ngobefuo told him. Even at that critical moment he could still afford to be insolent. This was when the Chief really understood the extent of the people's grievance against Antony and himself.

"That my brother died," he held out five fingers, "five months ago, five full months ago. And yet nobody here thought it important that I should be told about it. Is it possible?"

"But we have told His Highness now about it," Ngobefuo said cynically. He rose and went out as he said these words. The others too followed suit.

The day was Wednesday, the date the 19th, the month May, and Chief Nchindia had already spent nineteen of the twenty-one months of his confinement. As never before, a sense of inescapable doom seized him and he felt trapped, to his death.

He rose and went into his room where he immediately fell into his bed and, tossing himself from side to side, wept bitterly, like a child. They are inhuman, he thought. Those old men! But what could he do in the face of such wicked opposition.

That feeling of impotent wrath, of his unfulfilled efforts against them began to rise, pushing itself by degrees above the conscious level of the dark cluster of his mind, completely upsetting and permanently destroying it. All these aching thoughts induced, not for the first time, fits of depression which in turn brought on a string of nameless ailments which put him down for the two remaining months.

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Chapter Twelve

ANTONY HAD died. He actually had an accident and had been taken to Kepemnlo General Hospital where he remained for eight months. During this time nobody came to see him. He left the hospital, still sick and lame in one leg. He spent his last days in Likume with his uncle Anuse. There, after six more months of suffering, he died under suspicious circumstances and was given a very shameful burial by his uncle.

While in the hospital, as soon as he felt a bit strong to sit up in bed and write, he had written a letter to his brother Nchindia:

Casualty Ward,
Kepemnlo Gen. Hospital
Kepemnlo.
30th December, 1965

My Dearest Brother,

You must have heard, or you will be hearing, that I am now a patient in the above hospital. What is the cause? I cannot mention it again to you because you should know. It was after that catching ceremony. Sincerely speaking, I could not control myself when I found that I had been rejected. That was something I never expected. It was really a sad affair. My wife (May she Rest in Peace) could not drive. If she could, that would have saved us this calamity. I simply could not sleep in Small Monje after such a letdown, and after having heard such men like Ngobefuo talk so badly about me. I could not afford to stay there another night because of what that serpent you call the D.O. turned out to be. What he did to me cannot be recounted without driving me out of my senses. So I drove away, drunk, to our grave. Mercy died on the spot, with our child in her

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womb. But most unfortunately I survived. I should have been the one to die, I deserved to. But only God alone knows why he preserved me to suffer in this way.

The only person I sympathize with now is you Alex. I saw you escape into the bush. I expected that kind of reaction from you, considering how we both had talked about my being made the new Chief. Thank God you did not disappoint me. I do not blame you at all, at least for now. I blame but that mean, dirty, stupid, political nonentity - that wretch who styles himself the D.O. I blame the Elders for deliberately trampling on the tradition which they subscribed to. I blame Ngobefuo most especially - that most incorrigible rock of ages, whose myopic intransigence is the exact canker which will surely destroy the tribe. If you will rule and not just reign, then you will have to handle these people carefully.

But Alex, I hope you will not blame me for expressing my doubts aloud. You know that when events turn out different from popular expectations a lot of suspicion creeps into human minds, like mine now. I must first of all make things very clear. I am not accusing you of taking a crown that should have been mine. It would have been mine no doubt, but it turned out to be yours through no fault of yours. Fair enough. No one can stand against destiny. Tell me very frankly: Did you ever know by any means that you were going to be Chief? Did somebody ever say in passing to your hearing that there was a possibility that I might not be the Chief? Do not fear to tell the truth. It sounds childish quite all right, but I need it because the change came so abruptly. Your answer will help me bear the loss better. I cannot pretend that I like what happened.

As it stands now, I shall be in the hospital for months or even years. But, please, write at once. I want to know how you are feeling about me. If you refuse to write, I shall not come to beat you or kill you. In fact, I shall do nothing. All I will do is conclude that, after having done all that for you, you went behind and conspired with that nefarious D.O. to ruin me.

Please, write at once.

Your brother, Antony

(For as long as you want it)

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Whatever might have happened if the letters of the two brothers had been allowed to reach their destinations remains only a matter for speculation, because none was ever given the opportunity to hear from the other. Ever since the interception of the Chief's first letter the D.O. had concluded that any direct communication with persons of Antony's calibre was not only unhealthy, but also injurious to the Chief's status. If he had any inclinations to allow Antony write to his brother, when he saw how he had been insulted in Antony's letter, he decided to give it a very special corner in his file. He did not even think it necessary to mention it to the Elders.

Antony had given Nchindia one month to reply, (allowing for irregularities in the postal system) or be damned with the rest of the tribe. Yet even after three months of feverish expectation he had still not heard anything from Nchindia. Only then did he decide to take a definite stand - against his brother. Now convinced that Nchindia had, not after all, been as innocent as he deemed in the events leading to his rejection, Antony had written one last letter to him:

16th May 1966

Nchindia please,

I am very grateful that you have helped me to discover a monster in human form, at least in my own family. I do not want you to think that I am saying this because I have been deprived of the throne of Small Monje. No. If that throne had been reserved for monsters like yourself, then it will be real madness for me to regret losing it.

You had the misfortune that after having done so much for you in your miserable days, without any hope of reward, nature had preserved me to see you in your bright days, and to see the adder that has always been in you. If you have forgotten what I once meant to your stupid life, just because you have sat on the throne that should by right and merit belong to me, then let me tell you that life does not

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end there. If we ever live to meet again, you will have cause to regret, because I will never forgive you.

I do not expect any reply to this letter because it is too late. Consider me till the end of your life.

Your enemy,

Antony.

Six months after that he died, and, true to his word, without forgiving Nchindia.

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Chapter Thirteen

ANTONY DIED in December. This was during the period of the Chief's confinement. He had no direct access to the outside world and the name of Antony was banned from the lips of the people. Nobody saw any need to communicate the uninspiring news to him until he stumbled on the almanac that May.

The two months remaining before his confinement would expire became in his distressed mind like two years. In his heart he felt in the exceptional circumstances that the battle was not yet totally lost. His brother was dead but he thought he could still render him a service which would acquit him before God of any guilt. First he was to mourn for him, and this he was to do by having his hair completely shaved off in the traditional manner.

When he invited Ntongntong to do it for him the man flatly refused to undertake an act which he and his kinsmen considered a direct contradiction of the vows they had all taken on the deceased. He did not give up. He knew it would be ridiculous, but he tried to do it himself. Sitting in front of a mirror he managed with a pair of scissors and a razor blade to shave the front as far as he could see and reach. Then he decided to be always in his cap until the hair grew again to cover the area he had shaved.

He ate very little and slept not at all. He spent all his time in a meditative silence at the window in his parlour, only waiting for the day of his freedom.

That day finally came.

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He took his time and went through the ceremonies as the tradition required, doing even more than the Elders expected from him. He willingly went to be presented to *Akeukeuor*, twice; first with the crown on and later without it. He danced with the crown on his head and then when they asked him to do so without the crown he happily took it off and went on, even donating prizes to the best dancers in the end. When at last he asked and was told that it was all over, he decided to be himself - free and secure within his own reality, within his own rights. That same evening he sent for the Elders and told them:

"I hear that after the period of confinement the Chief is free to travel to wherever he likes."

"Your Highness heard well," Ngobefuo answered.

"Fine. So I have called you people to let you know that for my own first journey I will be going to Likume tomorrow."

The people looked at one another for a long time. One thing was certain: the much - dreaded Nkoaleck was dead. There was therefore no immediate danger in allowing him to go there. But a few points needed to be clarified to the Chief. Ngobefuo said:

"Your Highness, we do not refuse your going anywhere, even this night. It is according to the tradition. But you cannot go to a place like Likume tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I was still coming to say why, Your Highness."

"Say it then."

Ngobefuo paused for a long time before speaking again:

"Likume is not like any other town in the coast, His Highness. There are hundreds of our people there. If His Highness is thinking of going there he should know that he is not going to go there like an ordinary person. He will be going there as the Paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje. That is what he is. His people there know that the visit of a Paramount Chief to such a place is always

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announced one moon before, so as to allow his subjects there enough time to prepare to receive him. It is never..."

The Chief who had long started shaking his head interrupted him with a definitive "no". Then as the old men gaped on he added:

"I must go there tomorrow. I do not care about how things have been done in the past." He left them sitting in and went out to lean on a pillar on the veranda.

The people spoke amongst themselves for a while and then rose and went to meet him outside. Unwilling to be dissuaded the Chief left them there and returned to the parlour, saying nothing to anybody.

"Your Highness, we think that you are determined not to take your duties as Chief seriously, even at this moment," Achiebefuo said.

"I am determined not to," the Chief told them in a severe tone. Then withdrawing from the window where he was once more leaning he was heard muttering as he went into his room: "I am going tomorrow. If you like you can enter a bottle."

The old men remained standing in the centre of his parlour for about five minutes without saying anything, hoping he would change his mind and come out to tell them. He did not stir. They went away. At the entrance into the *ndie-ndee* they sat down and talked things over. They would defy him too and refuse to enter any bottle, summon a meeting and there decide that he will not go anywhere. They could even call on the D.O. to bring pressure to bear on him and make it impossible for him to go anywhere. The D.O., they knew, would be only too willing to cooperate with them.

But that would not be according to the tradition which they were out to uphold. The Chief was already very bored with the palace. That might account for his anger. The Biongong people say that when a hen leaves the incubator, it must be chased far out of the house if the house-keeper does not want to step on warm excrement. The Chief had

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been in the house for too long. So it was safer to let him go and wear out his ire somewhere else. That might change him. They had only the prestige of the crown to fear and to protect.

This they would very easily take care of. The Chief would not go alone. They would inflate the traditional number of servants and Elders that the Chief was supposed to take on such a journey. They would add amongst that number people in whose presence the Chief would not easily misbehave; people who could explain to their tribesmen in Likume why they had not sent a prior notice concerning the visit of the Chief. As the Chief would have it they left the following day for Likume.

On arrival in Likume Chief Nchindia checked into a Motel with only one servant, claiming no knowledge of any other person who told the receptionist that he had travelled with him. The rest of his entourage was forced to seek sleeping places with relatives and tribesmen in various corners of the town. From his Motel residence he managed within the short space of three days to get in touch with people who gave him all the information that he wanted to know about the last days of his brother. He, in fact, got even more than he wanted from the printing of the Almanac to the death and burial of Antony.

He then summoned Kwe-nwoh and Anuse to find out why even though he was dead, the picture of Antony could not be included in the paper of their tribe. He received only a disjointed series of half-truths, blatant lies. Kwe-nwoh said, and was supported by Anuse, that Antony's picture could not be found, that he had died, that he had gone mad, that he had lost all respect and the like.

It was over the question of Antony's death that his endurance ran its course. He was told by a very reliable informant that the day before his death, Anuse, in whose house the deceased had been living, and in whose care he had addressed all his letters after his dismissal, had received

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a letter from the Ministry of Finance. Always anxious to get more money, Anuse had opened the letter to see what the Ministry of Finance had to say to his nephew. The text had been in French, but below the page there were figures of huge sums of money.

This had excited Anuse further and he had taken it to a friend to interpret for him. The man's knowledge of French had been so misleading that he had told him that the Government intended taking Antony back into service and that the figures indicated money that would be paid to him as compensation for wrongful dismissal. It had been merely a guess because Anuse, having appealed to him for a translation, the reader had thought it wise to at least say something.

But Anuse had taken it to be the only truth. What is more, he had not shown Antony the letter that day when he reached home. That night Antony died! It was said that those who had heard of the letter, and who knew what kind of person Anuse was when it concerned money, suspected some foul play. This suspicion was said to have turned into an accusation when it was later said again that Anuse had been sighted at the treasury the very morning it was made known to the people that Antony had died in the night. The treasurer had said, when contacted, that Anuse had come there with a document which he, the treasurer, told Anuse that it was a regular publication from the Ministry of Finance showing how much tax an individual is supposed to pay before his retirement.

Whatever the cause of his death, Antony had not been buried by the tribe. He had been taken by a team of hired mourners to an obscure corner in the forest and buried. This shameful burial, the President of the tribesmen said, was supposed to serve as a very good lesson for those who were still growing up, and who did not yet know that the shoulder can never grow above the head.

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Chapter Fourteen

THE CHIEF was in Likume for ten days. On the evening of the day he returned to Small Monje he asked his messenger to go around and announce that he would like to meet the Elders at once. He refused to tell Ntongntong the purpose of the meeting.

Although this had become the Chief's way of doing things it was untraditional. If the Chief had anything to say or discuss with the Elders of the wider Council which he now wanted to talk to, he was supposed to talk to Ntongntong first. This man studied the issue at stake and it was he who decided whether it was necessary to communicate the matter to the Council for open discussion or not. Since, by virtue of his age and experience he knew the hearts of the Elders better, the Chief was thus saved the possibility of the unforeseen embarrassment of an open confrontation. To summon one in this arbitrary way was not just a breach of the tradition but a risk which anybody who cared about his position as Chief ought never to take.

This meant nothing to Chief Nchindia. And the Elders had not yet forgotten how violently he had defied them and embarked on a senseless and hasty maiden journey to Likume. When they came he greeted them very politely and showed them where to sit. When they had sat down he began:

"My fathers, I know this evening is going to be another bad one for all of us."

"Why, Your Highness?" Achiebefuo enquired.

"Because I have called you to talk about my brother Antony."

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"I have called you here today to ask you if anybody here knew how he died and where he was buried."

They were silent for some time and then Achiebefuo asked:

"Has His Highness finished?"

"Well, yes."

The man shook his head and asked:

"Is that what forced His Highness to hurry out of Small Monje to expose us to such ridicule and shame in Likume?"

The Chief did not answer him. He stared at them and then repeated his question.

"Nobody knows it," Ngobefuo said.

"Why does nobody know it?"

"Nobody knows it because nobody has even thought it necessary...."

"Now it is necessary," the Chief said loudly, "I have to know it now."

"And when His Highness knows it?"

"And when I know it, whatever can be found of him will be dug and brought here and given the burial that befitted him. He was the first graduate of this tribe. This tribe will never have another Antony. If he was never anything else, if he was but a slave, that important qualification was enough to make anybody change his present status and accord him his rightful position. He was a great son of this tribe, so he must be buried in front of his house. And he was certainly more than that, he was a prince of the royal line of this tribe. The man who ought to have been the Chief." The Chief paused, looked around and continued:

"You were very glad to hang pictures of dogs, fowls, butchers and all sorts of mad men called dancers on the walls in the palace. You did not see the picture of your first graduate, but you thought that was okay. If it satisfied you, it satisfied nobody else, especially me. That is what I called you to tell you that I will do. You can now go back. Thank you for coming."

The news had reached Small Monje before the Chief

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returned from Likume, that he had disowned all his tribesmen during his visit there. He had not gone to stay with the leader of his subjects in Likume in order that he would be worshipped at every pace, which was the respect he deserved. He had checked into a hotel in the centre of the town, a popular *rendez-vous* for harlots and thieves of all categories. He had completely discarded the accoutrements of his office as Paramount Chief, had gone in jeans, open-breasted shirts, and shoes with heels as high as one metre, entering one drinking house after the other, shaking hands with riff-raffs. Then he had crowned these atrocities by licking the lips of harlots whom he gracefully allowed to sit on his laps, in full view of the public.

All these had been very carefully reported to Ngobefuo and those who stayed back in the palace. They were still looking for the language in which to reprimand him when he invited them and made the declaration. Ngobefuo decided to shelve the case of his misconduct in Likume for another occasion and deal only with the present problem.

He began very calmly: "Before we go out as His Highness wants us to do, I will remind him of something. Even if His Highness was not watching, His Highness has been told, at least by me about what Nkoaleck did to this tribe on the day of the catching."

"I have not said that I was not told."

"And does that not satisfy you?"

"Not one bit. It does not satisfy me at all."

Ngobefuo shrugged his shoulders and rose to his feet and said:

"Then we cannot stretch our hands longer than the bones in them. We have always told you that we are here to protect the tradition of our people. If we who see and know tell you, and that still does not satisfy His Highness, then let His Highness have his own way." He paused for a while and then said: "But let me speak to you here and now for the last time with the mouth and voice and heart of

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somebody who has a great knowledge, a great love and a great respect for the tribe and its ways, and who therefore knows what is good and not good for it: If your brother Nkoaleck was not made Chief as you have been thinking he ought to be, it was the decision of the best minds amongst us here now. And if your brother Nkoaleck has never been given the respect you keep thinking that he deserved from any of us, it was also the decision of the best minds amongst us, here and now. If I am mistaken let my brothers straighten my path".

He resumed his seat for a brief moment. There was no protest, only encouraging nods. He rose again and continued:

"It will therefore be contrary to our traditions and laws for all time, for this same Nkoaleck whom we condemned here and excluded from our blood on just grounds, to be brought back to this same ground and mourned for as if nothing had ever happened between him and this tribe. His Highness, the Paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje, if you still say "yes," to this affair, we too will still say "no." Several times. We had never acted under the influence of alcohol. People do not swear and later withdraw."

The Chief waited for him to stop talking. Then he said:

"The bones or hairs or anything of my brother Antony Nkoaleck which can be found shall be dug and brought here and given a ceremonial burial as I have said. And let me add that this is to happen soon. Good night."

He rose and went out. The old men decided that the D.O. should be informed about the matter at once because they knew that the Chief was serious about what he had said. They did not know what arrangements he had already made down the coast to effect his desire. It was even suspected by some that he might have raised a force with which to invade the tribe and impose his will on them.

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Very early the following morning they went to see the D.O. to whom they explained their problem. The D.O. listened to them very carefully and when they had finished he reassured them:

"Not in Small Monje. We can't allow him to carry out that kind of thing. You just go back to the palace. I am coming soon to see the Chief and talk to him myself."

The D.O. resolved, as he drove to the palace later that afternoon, that Antony's bones would not be brought back. Every weapon in his arsenal should be used to prevent it. It was he, the D.O., who had saved the whole country from the dangerous claws of that Antony. It was he who had made it impossible for that same Antony to corrupt the Chief with his stupid letters, letters in which he had insulted every single soul in the tribe. He would stop at nothing in preventing anybody from making a martyr of such a man. As soon as he got to the palace and saw the Chief he began very casually:

"Chief, you know that to be called Chief you must have people under you?"

The Chief knew what he had come for, but decided to be firm.

"What do you mean sir?"

"A Chief must have people to rule in order to be worthy of the name."

"That's true, sir."

"Okay. So far you have ruled your people excellently well. But you seem to be on the verge of making one grievous mistake, and which your people are swearing to

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desert you. In any country of this nature, so peaceful, so peace-loving, any thoughtless action which is likely to cause the people to rebel against a constituted authority, amounts to subversion."

"Why do my people want to desert me?"

"They want to desert you because you have decided to bring back the bones of Antony Nkoaleck."

"Well, then, let them go away. My brother deserved more than they had given him in this tribe. He was our first graduate. Antony was a prince of this kingdom, who should even have been ruling in my place. He was my brother. When he died nobody told me about his death. I only heard about it six months afterwards, and only by accident. And the way they buried him!" he shook his head sadly. "Even a thief deserves better treatment. If we bury a prince and a graduate like that, how do we expect to bury a slave or a dog? Thrown in the bush like that without even a wooden cross to honour his own grave? Let them desert me, sir, if that is their reason."

The D.O. was quiet

"I must give him back the respect he deserved. And the only way of doing that is by bringing his bones back and burying them the way we bury princes. He must be mourned. If they do not agree, that is their business. If they want to desert me because I want to honour my brother, let them go ahead. I care less."

From the moment he entered the palace the D.O.'s mind had started working on an argument to use to dissuade the Chief. Now it was concluded. He began softly:

"I don't know whether you will believe me or not. I would very honestly want to make you understand that my love for Antony is even more than yours for him."

The Chief was surprised and looked up at the D.O. with a dubious expression of disbelief. The man went on undaunted.

"Antony ate and drank with me and slept with me on the

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same bed, even on the night of the day you were made Chief. He had always been my bosom friend. And, talking as an intellectual, it is no insult if I say too that you could never have appreciated his worth more than myself. I know what he meant for a developing country like this. And it is for this reason that I have come to tell you that I will never accept that you carry out this pledge.

"I will explain, Chief. I do not want my respect for him or yours to make us behave so irrationally as to turn our love for him into dishonour in the final analysis.

"I will explain further," the D.O. interrupted the Chief's uneasiness. "Your brother has died, and he has been buried as you said, where everything is buried, in the forest, without any cross to mark his grave. Am I right so far?"

"You are right, sir."

"How then will it be possible for you to know that this or that grave is his."

There was no answer.

"We all know that this great graduate was also a prince. But imagine what a great dishonour it will be for our dear Antony if we go now under the zeal of worshipping him, to dig the bones of some other person, say a slave, or even an animal, a dog or a cow or pig. Then we bring it here and call for people to mourn for it, saying that they are the bones of prince Antony Nkoaleck! If it were you, would you lie quiet in your grave?"

He did not wait for an answer but rose at once, annoyed by the very idea to countenance any response. The Chief did not hold him back as he had anticipated. At the threshold he stopped on his own and came back and went on:

"Chief, it is not that I am simply interested in dancing over bones. Know now that I am very ready even today to phone to Tetseale for the Government helicopter to be sent to Likume to dig those bones and bring them here. I am willing to do that to prove to you that we are really on the

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same side in this matter. The big question remains: whose bones shall we bring back for this honourable burial?"

The Chief fidgeted visibly, blew his nose loudly, and wiped his face several time. He felt defeated, but feared to show it. Yet the D.O. smelt it in his marrow. He decided to round off the talk by asking the Chief to apologize to him as the late Antony's personal friend and then pray to the gods to ask Antony to forgive him forever contemplating such a disgraceful act over his death.

This the Chief did and then went on to confess that he had not really given the matter careful thought before making his declaration to the Elders. He added that it was the old men's shallowness that had inflamed him into such rashness. The D.O. accepted his apology and went on to tell him that if he wanted to work well in his office, he was not to take offence too easily at every little thing the old men did, because they were already too old to reason. They shook hands and then embraced each other to show that between them there existed no problem. Then they parted.

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Far from bridging the gulf that had always existed between the Elders and the Government, the D.O.'s victory over the Chief only served to aggravate their enmity. When he left the Chief's chambers and the people came up to him and asked what had transpired. He said:

"Antony Nkoaleck has been forgotten. Nothing of his will ever be seen on this soil. His name shall never be mentioned any more. I have spoken to the Chief as the District Officer of Small Monje."

"And did he agree Goment?" Everybody asked at the same time.

"He had no choice. Nobody argues with the District Officer."

And the matter ended there. The Chief never raised the point again. But the people felt infuriated that the arbitration of an outsider - a D.O. needed to be sought for the demands of their tradition to be impressed on their Chief. They were glad that their Chief was no longer going to reverse their decision on Nkoaleck. They were thankful to the D.O. for that service, but they did not want him. If they were ever to mean anything to their tribe and its ways, that D.O. must go back to where he came from.

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Chapter Fifteen

THE DIFFERENCES between Chief Nchindia and the Elders continued unabated. Some months after the crisis about giving Anthony a befitting burial were over, he received some letters from Likume which he felt necessitated a general meeting with the Elders to resolve the issues raised in them. Word was immediately sent round for the Council to meet. When everybody came together he told them.

"I have here two letters from Likume about the marriage of my sister Anyi."

"Your daughter Anyi, Your Highness," Ngobefuo corrected him, vainly trying to conceal his disappointment. "We have told His Highness that from the day he became Chief all his sisters became his daughters, and all his brothers his sons."

"Yes, my daughter Anyi," he accepted the correction, but not without a brief frown to indicate how little he appreciated it. The two men looked at each other for a long time with mutual hate in the silence which hung in the air between them. Then Ngobefuo turned away and spat. When he turned again to look in the Chief's direction, the latter spat too. If his spitting had been intended as an insult, he had returned it. He then wiped his mouth and as if he had not really spat in revenge he asked very politely: "Father, let me know, who claims the dowries for the Chief's daughters?"

"We had already told His Highness what was right."

"Then what does my uncle mean by all this?"

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He carefully explained how Anuse was determined not to give her to the Chief.

"We told His Highness, it was some time ago now, that Anuse claimed that he brought up the girl and that he paid all the money for her school."

"What school? What book does my sis... What book does Anyi know? What school did she attend that my uncle will refuse to give her for dowry to the throne?"

There was nothing the people could say since they knew nothing about schools. The Chief thought for a very long time then enquired:

"What do we do then?"

Everybody felt very impressed with the question. For the first time their Chief had thought their opinions worthy of attention. They silently hoped that it should be the beginning of better days to come.

"I want you people to suggest something. What line of action can be taken in a thing like this. Mr. Anuse is not right at all."

"We are with Your Highness," Ngobefuo said very significantly, and shaking his head in great satisfaction. "We think too that he is very wrong." He looked round for approval and the others nodded. "And what we can do now is for Your Highness to write a book and sign it with his own hand. He shall send it with any of us to give to Anuse. If it is not something else, we think His Highness will get his due."

"If he still doesn't give it?" the Chief asked.

"If you do as we say you will get your daughter," Ngobefuo said reassuringly.

The Chief agreed to send the letter. Achiebefuo and two other old-men took the letter to Likume, Anuse would not release either the dowry or the girl. When this was communicated to the Chief he summoned another general meeting of his Council of Elders. There he told them that he had decided to go down to Likume himself.

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When the Chief Nchindia had gone to Likume the day after his confinement had expired, and had learnt how his brother had died and was buried, he summoned Anuse and Kwe-nwoh, the two men who were responsible for the shameful burial that Antony's body received. When he asked them to deny of confirm what he had heard about their actions, Kwe-nwoh tried to defend himself by saying that he had acted within the dictates of the constitution of their tribesmen in Likume of which he was the President, not just a figure head.

"I think you had better shut your mouth," the Chief told him in a fit of anger. Then he went on: "If you had grain of sympathy, if you had any grain of respect for education, you as the so-called president of our people here, you should never have treated Antony that way at all." He had not given Kwe-nwoh the chance to say anything else. Turning to Anuse he had said:

"My uncle, I am sorry to say the part you played in the death and burial of your son had made me lose all my respect for you as a human being. I do not want to tell the story exactly about what you did before my brother died. It is a shame. If you did not consider money more important than human life, and if you had seen in Antony your own blood, you would never have done that."

The two men had felt themselves humiliated. But they had borne it patiently, without returning an offensive word, because they thought the Chief had been sent by the Elders to look into the case. It was only after the Chief had gone back that they heard that he had undertaken the journey against the wishes of the Elders, and that he had already lost all respect back home on account of his queer manner of talking and disagreeing with people. Only then did they take the offensive. They started rallying people behind them, and manufacturing all sorts of lies about the Chief to run down his image. He was never to be favourably received in Likume again.

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When the question of Anyi arose therefore it was hardly surprising that Anuse refused to co-operate with him. On the Chief's part, he felt that the issues between Anuse had himself needed one last duel. When he talked of going down himself Ngobefuo refused.

"No, Your Highness," he told him. "You cannot come down so low. You will continue to send people. Next time I will go myself. Give the Council time to study this affair and see whether the presence of Your Highness is necessary in Likume for..."

"My presence is necessary." the Chief said. There was silence. All the cheerfulness which had come over the old men's lives since the last time they spoke to the Chief suddenly vanished. They began to regard him once more with the old silent aggression. It was Ngobefuo who spoke again:

"Why did His Highness call us here today? Was it to discuss what can be done or to tell us that he was going on his travels again?"

"Both," the Chief said without even looking at him.

"And does His Highness still remember all those decisions of the judges which he had been reversing?"

"That is past and gone."

"Yes, past and gone Your Highness," Ngobefuo nodded. "It is past and gone, but not forgotten. That is what we build our future on. On what is past and gone. We do not ignore the past."

"But I must go."

"You must go, Your Highness. When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Then safe journey, Your Highness." He rose and asked the rest to go with him. On their way to their various huts they chose certain Elders to accompany the Chief again, just in case that would restrain his excesses.

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Between Anuse and the Chief the confrontation that ensued took on an unforeseen turn. Each sought to use the opportunity to score a signal victory over the other. It became not so much a disagreement between two bitter enemies. Whatever the Chief was thinking about when he decided to come down, one thing was clear in the old men's mind: that a calabash should never have anything to do with a stone, because as the saying went, whether it is the calabash which hits the stone or it is the stone that hits the calabash, it is the calabash which breaks.

When the Chief got to Likume and sent somebody to tell Anuse that he had come and wanted to see him. Anuse told the man who brought the message to go and ask the Chief whether he did not know his house. A man who heard Anuse talk about the Chief several times told the latter that it would be better to leave the girl with Anuse and return home. The Chief dismissed the man from his company and decided to go and confront Anuse in his small office at the gate into the main market. As soon as Anuse saw him coming he burst out laughing very derisively. The Chief did not speak until he reached him. Then he said:

"My uncle, I have come to take Anyinke or her dowry."

"Which Anyi?"

"Anyinke, my daughter."

"True?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?" Anuse asked

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Silence.

"You ask who I am?"

"I asked who you are."

A crowd had started gathering. The Chief looked and found himself almost surrounded by passers-by. He turned and faced Anuse, determined to humble him. Rascals were throwing jibes from all side - "questions," "hansa", "question", "hansa," - as the two men shouted deprecations at each other, questioned and answered each other. The Chief bit his lips and felt cold perspiration run down his cheeks. He thought of telling Anuse off and going away. But he feared people would jeer at him. Nobody had invited the rascals, but they were ready to cheer the winner, whoever it was. He did not like their presence. He turned violently round and asked:

"Weti wona want for ya? Who call wona?"

"Ah ha, massa, if the man dong pass you jus gree." one rascal said from behind the thickening crowd. An elder called the Chief from behind, afraid by the dictates of the tradition to pull him aside. The Chief would not listen. He moved up closer to Anuse and, pointing to his breast, asked:

"You ask me who I am, my uncle?"

Is it a law to ask you who you are? I asked you who you are."

"I am the paramount Chief of Small Monje." he said. The people blinked their eyes and looked at him unbelievingly.

"And is this Small Monje?"

Silence.

"Is this your palace?"

"I have come to take my daughter from you."

"Who told you that I am keeping your daughter?" One of the old men who had come with the Chief could not withstand the disgrace any longer.

"Your Highness," the man cried out. The Chief turned. "Let us leave this thing I beg you. It is not an affair for the market."

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"I want my daughter from Anuse." the Chief said, calling him by his name directly.

"You won't get her." Anuse said rising.

"I will."

"I say you won't."

"Bet me here," the Chief showed him his palm. Anuse struck it.

"Anuse!" an elder called. "You do that?"

"I do it?"

"It is not the Chief's hand you are striking like that. It is the hand of the tribe. The hand of your fathers."

"It can be the hand of my mother," Anuse said gathering up his files and walking off.

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That night, against the advice of everybody else the Chief went to Anuse's house to fight the battle to its logical end. Anuse knew he would come so he asked the girl in question to get herself well-dressed. When the Chief eventually came and repeated his demand, he called for the girl and pointing to her before everybody said:

"This is the girl you call your daughter. A girl you never saw before, you were only waiting for the day when she will be ripe for marriage, to come for her dowry. For the past eighteen years what do you think your daughter had been eating? But you care about how much she costs. Just come here and touch even her hair, if you say you are her father." As he said this he rose, held the girl's hand and took her near the Chief.

He still did not stir.

"You call yourself a paramount Chief. Nonsense. If you think there are thorns under that your crown we shall take it from you so that you walk the way you were born. Perhaps that is what you want." He then took the girl's hand and they went to sit in his veranda behind the house. The Chief and his attendant sat, disgraced and quiet.

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Chapter Sixteen

AFTER THE Chief's return from Likume the Council of Elders decided to meet him in his chamber and give him a last warning before taking a major and unprecedented action against him. Angelina, the woman for whose sake the Chief had defied tradition and forced them to accept as his *Ngwi-Nkongho* was with him when they entered. She rose and went up to greet them.

Nobody answered her. There were kola nuts in a cupboard. As a favourite wife would do to the Chief's visitors she took them out, put them on a plate and showed to the Chief and then carefully started breaking the larger slices, which corresponded to the number of people present. The Chief took one and threw in his mouth and then allowed her to show the plate round, beginning with Ngobefuo.

She held the plate in front of him, paying her courtesy in the traditional manner of feminine respectfulness. Ngobefuo refused to touch the plate, sent her away with an indignant motion of the hand and continued pulling at his pipe. The others too followed his example and refused to share in it. After showing the plate round for three very long humiliating minutes, she placed it down by the Chief and departed in shame.

Yes, that was the way to treat her, the old men thought. She used charms to draw the Chief towards her, but they will use water to keep her away from them. She had made it impossible for the Chief to use any other woman. She had caused the *Ngwi-Nkongho*, the chosen girl for the throne,

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to sleep out of the Chief's bed on the first night of his coronation. That was wrong. Did she think that she was the only woman to whom God had given a vagina? She could be thinking that she had children. Those three girls she had would die in her house. The tribe will receive no money for them, and it will offer them to nobody for marriage.

Why did the Chief refuse the decision of the Council of the tribe? They would tell him their mind. That was his last chance. His very last chance. Their Chief was their house. Their house ought to remain clean, always. If a house gets dirty they clean it. If it gets so infested with vermin that no amount of cleaning will make it fit for human habitation, what do they do? They bring it down and build another one. They had reasons for burning down this particular house. They had reasons before God and man, for wanting to put up another house. Yes, they did. The excrement in the house was smelling and it had reached a point where they could no longer endure. They would pull down the house. Yes. Ngobefuo quenched his pipe, and began:

"Your Highness, we have come to remind you that the throne of Nkokonoko Small Monje on which you are sitting now rests on the shoulders of a giant. And that since you are on it, you therefore ought to see further and better than everybody else."

"Who said I do not see?" the Chief spat out the kola he had started chewing. He knew Ngobefuo was insulting him.

"At least you have done nothing to prove that you can see better than anybody else. We who are standing on nothing, we see far enough and tell you. And you still refuse to believe us..."

"What do you mean?" the Chief asked, fighting in vain to overlook the disgrace they had just inflicted on his beloved wife.

"The fly followed the corpse to the grave because it had nobody to advise it," Ngobefuo went on from a tangent.

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"When you received that bad news from Anuse and said you would go there yourself, we begged you not to go, talking as a people who have eyes and ears. But you refused to listen to the voice of wisdom and went."

"Yes, I went."

"And did you succeed?"

"I did."

Ngobefuo giggled obscenely, then giving himself some seconds to reflect on how far their Chief had strayed from the path of righteousness, he laid down a final complaint:

"When you insisted and went down to the coast again, we did not again allow you to go alone. We are too old to forget that when a man goes to the latrine without something with which to clean his anus he can do many wrong things. We sent people again with you. And, apart from the things you already know that you did, the news of the things which happened, and which are still happening there now does not please us at all because it concerns our Chief".

"What news have you heard about your Chief which does not please you? What did you say I have done?"

There was a long silence. Ngobefuo knew what everybody expected him to say, but he decided not to say it. There was still one pillar on which the house was leaning and Ngobefuo wanted to wait first and see if that would support the house, and for how long. He told the Chief:

"We have received very sad news about the behaviour of the Chief's wives down the coast. The palace is now empty of them."

The Chief took in a very long breath and then said:

"You have said that before."

"Yes, but since that did not mean anything to you I will say it again. They say that the women are now involved in every act of shame in the coast. Sleeping with uncircumcised, passers-by, people who never wipe their anuses after going to the latrine. It is not good to hear."

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"And these are the women who had shared a bed with the Chief!" Achiebefuo pointed out.

"This too is new to us." Ngobefuo continued. "And we do not like it. It goes against the grain of our tradition. If you did not think the white hairs on our heads to be wood-ash which we poured there, if you had listened to us from the very beginning, you would not have been selling this great title of ours for so low a price. And you have been told over and over again that having slept with a woman, none of your brothers can ever marry her, or want to like her, without offending the tradition."

"My father Achiebefuo, do you agree with this?" the Chief asked.

"But that is the truth my first man is saying. Why should you ask me like that?"

"I have my reasons. Was it not you who persuaded me to sleep with those women you are now talking about?"

"And even if he did," Ndenwontio declared, "it was well meant. That was his duty as it was the duty of any of us sitting here now. There has never been any other way of making a new Chief know that a woman was his wife. We were not asking you to lick your elbow."

"I told you people that I had a wife."

"We knew. You told us. But we told you right from that minute that the tribe had other women for you to take as wives, as part of your title. Why should we begin to talk about this now after so many years? You were not caught yesterday."

"But I simply cannot have all these women as wives. I told you so."

Silence.

"I had Angelina. You people added five."

"*And did you take*?"

"Where would he have kept Angelina, his egg?" another elder asked.

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The Chief ignored the sarcasm and said:

"I took."

"You took?" Ngobefuo asked with a sneer.

"Yes, I took."

"Where are they now?"

Silence.

"And in any case, if you took five, that still left you with eleven more in your name, not counting those your father left. A man never plants only a single grain of corn because no one can look into the seeds of time to tell which seeds would grow and which would die. You needed them all."

"But I told you that I could not."

"You could. You can. You should. Your father, was he not Fuo-ndee?"

"He was."

"Do you know how many women he had?"

No answer.

"Thirty and eight women. His wives. And nobody ever heard him groan and hold his waist. If you are still his child then you do..."

"I have a lot of brothers."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that they can marry them."

There was silence. The people looked at each other and then Ngobefuo pointed out:

"That is not talking like somebody who knows the ways of his people. We had said it before, and we are saying it again, that those women we are calling the Chief's wives were betrothed to this Royal Line by people who knew that they were daughters of royal blood too. And their fathers, dead or alive, gave us the daughters because they knew they were coming to be married to the reigning Chief. Not his brothers. That is why they say that royal blood never ends. If you try now to hand them over to people who are not Chiefs, even if they are princes, you will be putting an end

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to the royal blood which was supposed to pass through Small Monje onwards to other lands. The current of royal blood flows only forward. Our lips are now weak from telling you not to try to change our way of life."

"Any of my brothers can be Chief too. If the tradition allows me to sleep with the same women my father slept with, why should it not allow my brothers to sleep with or marry the women I have slept with?"

"It does not allow them and we do not want to prove that we know better than our fathers who made the laws for us. We have only come to tell you that a book will be sent to the coast demanding the return of all the Chief's wives to this palace."

"To which we all agree," a volley of voices concurred as Ngobefuo folded his hands and sat back to listen to the Chief's reaction.

"Is this the decision of the Council?"

"It is."

The Chief was silent for some time, then he asked:

"So these women you are requesting to come back, are they to continue to be the Chief's wives?"

"They are still your wives," Ajem-abeule told him. "If we lose them as it now seems, we shall lose the friendship of all their fathers, the Chiefs who are friends to this tribe."

"And now that they have slept with the uncircumcised and all sorts of people, what shall be said of me if I now take these women and call them my wives?"

"It was the Chief himself who first made the mistake of catching his fish and going back to the river to wash it without killing it," Ngobefuo remarked.

"So the mistake should continue? Should the Chief continue to wash his fish in that river?"

Ngobefuo was silent. When he thought he had found an answer to the question he said:

"If the Chief had been listening when I first said this thing, he would have heard me say it was news we received.

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We cannot swear or point to anybody who can say he saw this or that man doing this or that thing to this or that of the Chief's wives, in this or that place..."

"I did not expect to find or ask you to catch and bring any such person to me."

The futility of any further efforts at persuading the Chief was now obvious even to the most conservative of the Elders. Speaking almost to himself Ngobefuo said:

"We have told the Chief what we think is right. If he does not see with us, let him do as he pleases. We think we have walked with him far enough to allow him to go on alone. We shall never sit down again in front of him to beg him to do this or that. This is the last."

"Let it be the last. I told you people from the beginning that I did not want to be Chief. You did not hear. I shall do as I please. And what pleases me in this affair is that those women shall not come back to this palace as my wives. I mean what I say. If you do not see any reason why I should keep Angelina as my wife, I too do not see any reason why I should keep any of them as my wives. Let their fathers hate me for doing what pleases me."

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This was the way things stood when all of a sudden, the house they had finally resolved to destroy caught fire, all on its own accord.

First, a succession of rumours began to spread, and then an official radio announcement was made to the effect that the National House of Chiefs in Tetseale had been permanently abolished. It was a presidential decree. The reason given was that, "in view of the huge amounts of money the Government will require for the realization of the Eleven Educational Projects in the recent Fifteen Year Development Plan, funds are no longer adequate to cater for the private needs of paramount Chiefs as it had always been done in the past."

But, although the decree explained that the Government had not ceased to recognize the authority of the Chiefs in their kingdoms, it was received as a personal tragedy in Nkokonoko Small Monje. It seemed to imply the total abolition of chieftaincy there. It was of no consequence that the disappointment arising from the closure of that House affected Chief's and subjects all over the country.

In the National House of Chiefs every paramount Chief was entitled to a monthly emolument of 75.000 francs. This was much money if one considered that they did nothing to earn it. Chief Nchindia was a member of that house. That was the source of the tragedy.

So long as the Chiefs continued to receive this amount of money, Nchindia found one thing to make him at least one degree satisfied with remaining the Paramount Chief of Small Monje. He could afford to act or travel as he liked,

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without asking for the consent of the old men. He did not need to stoop to them for financial assistance of any kind. On his travels he did not need to stick to what he termed the *outmoded custom* of sleeping only with his people so that he could be treated as though he was still in his palace.

He had never been anxious to be worshipped, so why forfeit his freedom when he could afford hotel bills? He did not need to believe that palm wine had always been the wine of kings, and that it preserved the eyesight when he could afford whisky or gin or brandy without any inconvenience to anybody, and when he knew very well that he could pay anything to see an eye specialist and get spectacles if he ever had problems with his eyes. He did not need to be compelled to push raw cancerous tobacco into old wooden pipes when there were ready-made, filtered cigarettes to be easily ordered in cartons from the coast. "I can live like a white man till I die," he once told himself in one of his hotel beds in the coast.

But with the sudden abrogation of this steady source of his income, the situation called for a drastic, or even psychic readjustment of his way of life. That meant compromising his dignity!

That was not all. Perhaps by some rare exercise of economy the Chief might eventually have managed to find his feet again, if the correct version of the decree had been delivered to the people. But, as is common in remote environments the only version of the announcement known was the one which the first bearers brought. The man who first learnt of it was Ngangabe who in turn had heard it from the D.O.'s boy to whom the D.O. was said to have explained it upon receiving the news over the radio. Ngangabe told them that it was the Paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje who was never more to have a seat in the National House of Chiefs.

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Nobody was surprised because they all knew that their Chief's crimes had reached a stage where anything could befall him. In fact, they believed so strongly in this version of the story that even after they had gone to the D.O. to confirm the rumour and he had told them that it affected every paramount Chief, Ngobefuo doubted it. He told his kinsmen, and they believed, that it was their Chief who had caused the closure because Nchindia had done such outrageous things against their tradition that his presence in any assembly of normal human beings was enough to wreck it. When they came to the Chief to ask him what he had been told by the D.O. he refused to make any statement.

The Elders rejoiced at the consequences of the abolition of the House of Chiefs on their own Chief. The Chief had at last played into their hands. Or, at least fate had delivered him into their hands. They all knew that he spent every franc he earned before the following pay day. So where could he ever go again without asking for financial assistance from them? Who would give him money like that without dictating terms to him which he would be bound to honour?

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The decree had been published towards the middle of May, one week after the Chiefs had received their money for that month, and two days after Chief Nchindia had just returned from the Coast where he had gone to use the money to enjoy himself as usual. What was he to do? Was he to pack his things and flee from Small Monje? At least nobody would hold him back. But where was he to escape to? He could not go to Likume because he would be going to live like a poor man. Not in the town where he had always passed for a *Pocket-never-dry*. He could only go to a place where they did not know him and then live the way he had been living before he was made Chief.

That must be in Sowa. Was madam Celina still there? Did she ever see his letter? That was very many years ago. Why hadn't he ever written to her since then to enquire? What was her opinion of him now? What could his late brother have told her about him that she remained so silent. Perhaps she too hated to see him. Why had he never thought of going to Sowa to see her? And he had been going down to the Coast! And Likume was so near Sowa! He had made a mistake. No, he had not made any mistake. It was the mean way they had treated his late brother's corpse that had made him forget his old friends.

How was he going to start life again, after setting such a high standard as Chief? Was it going to be easy? Were the Elders going to allow him to escape? Did they not need their Chief? He would remain there. It was better to suffer in Small Monje and let people think that he was enjoying, even though they knew the truth about his situation. That was better than going to beg from people like Kwe-nwoh

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and Anuse, people he had so openly reviled! How they would be glad to receive him and torture him!

He would not go anywhere. He would bear the taunts of the Elders until he could do so no more. He would pretend to be good. He would ask to keep the tax money he had refused to touch. He would keep it and when it was enough for him to use to start a business he would raise an alarm that it had been stolen. After all, people know that thieves steal money everywhere. If they accused him he would resign and go to the Coast and start his business. That was what he would do. He was decided on that.

Throughout June Nchindia made only one journey out of Small Monje. And even this journey which he asked the Elders to sanction in a Council, was made to attend a general meeting of all the affected Chiefs in Tekwe. The purpose was to consider whether a formal protest to the Government about the abruptness of the decree could change their plight.

In a very long letter to the Head of State through the Provincial Governor, they outlined various development projects now disrupted, which were to be carried out with their earnings. There was some hope because they promised to withhold tax if the Head of State did not look into their case urgently. On his return from that meeting Chief Nchindia began once again to keep tax money. He said it was one of the resolutions taken at the meeting.

From July to August he remained in his palace, only going out from time to time for tax raids with his men. By the second week of September he had known the house of every tax collector in the district - a thing he never imagined in the beginning that he would ever do. This did not help his situation very much because the ardour with which he threw himself into the job made the tax-collectors who were themselves very unscrupulous, suspicious of his motives. Besides, they had been instructed to continue to treat him with contempt until he was completely humbled.

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Thus by the end of September, barely five months after the decree, Chief Nchindia had become one of the poorest and most miserable persons alive. Tax money was not forthcoming, and he found himself submitting to all sorts of indignities before the Elders, just to get a few francs to send for essential commodities from the Coast. He never saw more than one thousand francs of the tax money he had hoped to amass and swindle.

The Elders nodded triumphantly because they saw no better means of making a child learn who had bitten the finger that fed him. The Chief was finally their Chief. But this very feeling of achievement soon became their main cause of worry - especially for the very sensitive elements of the tribe.

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Chapter Seventeen

ONE OF the first persons to feel very genuinely aggrieved by the degradation of their throne was Achiebefuo. Very late one night he left his house and walked in the dark to wake Ngobefuo up and draw his attention to this anomaly, the thought of which had made it impossible for him to sleep soundly for the past month. He wanted to know how his kinsman was feeling towards the Chief's suffering. When he first knocked Ngobefuo refused to answer. He had to knock again and again until Ngobefuo was forced out of sleep. Even then he did not answer; he only sent somebody to go and find out who it was. Achiebefuo could not call his name from outside because it was night, and according to their customs, if he did, evil spirits might take it and use it for some evil purpose.

When the man went back inside and announced that it was Achiebefuo, Ngobefuo asked him to be brought into his room, to his bed-side.

"Is it death, my first man?" Achiebefuo asked as he came in. Ngobefuo stretched himself and yawned loudly, his bamboo bed creaking at every movement.

"Achiebefuo, I have not been feeling well."

"My first man, this is a wrong time for you to die. Shake off that sleep from your eyes and get up and listen. This is a wrong time for you to be sick. Wake up."

Ngobefuo threw his right hand over the edge of the bed and it fell directly on his pipe. He grabbed it, struck the month against the hardened earthen floor until it was emptied of the old tobacco. He threw his right hand again,

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this time father under the bed, and drew out a roll of tobacco. Achiebefuo did not interrupt the ritual. He only sat back, staring at him and wondering if he was aware of the problem that was eating him up, whether he imagined that it must be something serious to warrant his coming at that late hour. Ngobefuo pulled out one leaf of tobacco from a roll, placed the rest on his chest and then began to tear off bits which he stuffed into his pipe until he had only the dried vein of the leaf left.

"When the tobacco is finished I shall grind this and smoke," he said, half to himself, half to Achiebefuo. Achiebefuo said nothing. Ngobefuo held the vein against the rest of the tobacco and kept it back where he had taken it from. He had been lying in bed ever since Achiebefuo came in. He now rose and sat up, cleared his throat and spat a thick glob of mucus in the shadow which fell in front of Achiebefuo. The lamp was behind him, over his head.. The man withdrew his left leg just in time. It was well he was alert because it would have landed flat on his foot. It had not gone as far as Ngobefuo had thought it would. But he rendered no apology. He only stuck his pipe to his mouth and, striking a match and holding the flame against the tobacco, began to pull at it until it caught fire. He then withdrew the pipe from his mouth, cleared his throat and spat again, this time between his own legs. He wiped his mouth and asked:

"Achiebefuo what is it?"

The man did not answer until he asked again.

"My first man, where is my own pipe?"

"Have you been leaving it here with me?" Ngobefuo asked, returning the pipe to his mouth.

"Why do you want to take me upstream?"

"My first man, I do not want to take you upstream. I want you to know that I have come without my own pipe, in a cold night like this. Why?"

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Ngobefuo withdrew his pipe from his lips sharply.

The man went on:

"If you look at this thing in my heart the same way I am looking at it, and feel the way I am feeling about it, you will not sleep. You will not eat, you will not smoke, until we have washed this excrement from our bodies. Do you know what time of night it is?"

Silence.

"The cock will soon crow. Am I here to see you smoke?. My first man, we are beginning to do things which do not make worthy our grey hairs." He paused. Ngobefuo wetted his thumb and, pushing it viciously into his pipe put out the fire and placed the pipe near the bed. He then rose, took the old lamp from the upturned mortar on the old boxes which served as the stand and asked Achiebefuo to follow him. They opened the door and went out, round the house into an outer room at the back of the house where Ngobefuo usually held important discussions. There he showed Achiebefuo a seat and then sitting down he asked him:

"Achiebefuo, you have something to tell me, what is it?"

Achiebefuo folded his hands and began:

"I will not go very far, but, I will not start from the beginning. I will cut in the middle. Are you listening to me my first man?"

"That is why I brought you to this room." Ngobefuo told him.

"Good thing. Yesterday Ntongntong told me of a thing he over-heard between our Chief and Angelina."

"Angelina again?"

"Yes, Angelina again. But just listen, my first man. I have not come to tell you stories about Angelina. I have come to tell you something about the throne of Nkokonoko Small Monje. Listen." Ngobefuo turned his right ear toward him.

"Angelina had come to our Chief to tell him that she had just seen her flower."

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"Flower?"

"Yes, flower, my first man. Her flower. Now you who had once had ten women under you to wash your penis, what does that mean."

"Does it not mean that she was ready to have a child with her husband?"

"It means that. Yes, it means that. But my first man, our Chief said that he did not want to have any children without a father, that she should go away."

Silence.

"And she went away."

"That he did not want to have what?" Ngobefuo gaped.

"That he did not want to have children without a father."

"What did he mean by that?"

There was very long silence. Then Achiebefuo asked again:

"Does that mean anything to you?"

Ngobefuo looked across at him but said nothing.

Achiebefuo told him his thought:

"My first man, let me look into your heart and into the heart of tomorrow and tell you."

Silence.

"Our Chief will soon die. Our Chief knows that he will die soon. And how can a man know that he will die soon, if he does not intend to kill himself? He is not sick."

"Achiebefuo, that came into my mind, but I thought you had something else. That is why I did not talk."

Silence.

"My first man, let me tell you that if Nchindia dies today we have killed him. You and I. Fuo-ndee was one hundred and eleven years when we put him in the earth."

Silence.

"We do not want Angelina, and we have done everything to make our Chief know that we hate her. But our Chief has refused to listen to us. He told us that he cannot leave

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her. And yet we want our Chief. My first man, let us not be mad. Let us deserve these grey hairs on our heads. If it is said abroad that our Chief has killed himself, whose shame shall that be?"

"Our own," Ngobefuo said in his throat.

"Was one of the reasons why we wanted Angelina to go not because she had no son?"

"It was."

"How can we know what could have dropped from the penis of the Chief that night?"

"My first man, as you have said correctly, the shame is ours. And, at this age, we ought not to bring shame upon ourselves. That is the first. I have others to tell you, which you know too."

Silence.

"We were in the village the other week to try our Chief. In a village! He was guilty. Yes. We all agreed that since our Chief had refused to swear by *Ku-ngang* that he was not the one who stole the money the sub-Chiefs had contributed for the new school, he was guilty. Although everybody was happy to hear that the money was missing and that the school will never be built as Goment wanted, did we not join the others to laugh at and shame our Chief? A man we all took to ***Akeukeuor*** and showed him as our Chief! My first man, that was a fault."

Silence.

"My first man, are you seeing my footprints?"

"All, Achiebefuo, all." Ngobefuo was now fully affected by his kinsman's observation. Why had he not noticed anything wrong with any of those things before that night? Was he alive or dead? Achiebefuo was talking again:

"My first man, if your child breaks a neighbour's calabash, who pays for the damage?"

"I."

"Yes, you. We all agreed that Nchindia, let us call him

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by his name now, will pay the missing 75,000 francs, whether he stole it or not. Was that not what we agreed on?"

"It was."

"Does Nchindia make money?"

Ngobefuo shook his head in denial.

"Can he pay that money?"

Ngobefuo shook his again.

"Even if they put him on the market now and say he is for sale, can he fetch us 75,000 francs?"

Silence.

"Who then is going to pay for that money?"

"We shall."

"Yes, my first man. And whose shame is that? Is it the shame of the Chief?"

"No."

"Whose shame is it then?"

"Ours."

"Yes, ours. My first man, ours. My first man, are we that mad?"

Silence.

"Why then are we rubbing ourselves with excrement?"

There was silence. Then just when he was about to talk again Ngobefuo asked:

"Achiebefuo, how many people have said the same thing to you?"

"Nobody has talked to me, but they complained in my ears."

"But nobody has talked to me about it," Ngobefuo said. "Not even Ntongntong. Nobody," he added.

"Yes, it is the same thing my first man. When they complained to me they knew they were complaining to you too." Ngobefuo clapped his hands in wonder at how blind he had suddenly become in the execution of his duty on earth, the protection of the prestige of the crown of the tribe. Achiebefuo had more to say:

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"That is number two. And it is not the last. The greatest is behind. What happened this evening?"

Silence.

"I was returning from the village when I met the tax collectors, Ngangabe and Minba. They were with the Chief, on the main road. They were arguing and quarrelling"

"With the Chief?"

"With the Chief. And do you know what he told me?"

"Who?"

"Ngangabe."

"No."

"Ngangabe said he gave the Chief two thousand five hundred and fifty francs as tax money. The Chief denied and said it was not so. He said he took only two thousand five hundred francs. They talked and talked. Ngangabe was spitting as he walked. Spitting in front of the Chief. Our Chief!"

Ngobefuo writhed.

"And then what happened? Ngangabe called Minba as witness. Our Chief said he had no witness, because everybody hated him. Ngangabe pushed Minba aside and swore by *Ku-ngang* that he gave our Chief two thousand five hundred and fifty francs."

"By *Ku-ngang*?"

"My first man, let me cut my tongue if what I am talking is a lie. He swore by *Ku-ngang* himself and then asked our Chief to swear too, if he was innocent. Our Chief refused to swear."

Ngobefuo nodded several times.

"Does that mean anything to you?" Achiebefuo asked him.

"It means that our Chief took the money he was talking about from him."

"Yes, my first man, it means that our Chief took two thousand five hundred and fifty francs, but was now denying. Fifty francs! What is this fifty francs that our Chief took

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and was denying? Is that enough to pay for even one head of tobacco?"

"Is that enough to buy one finger-nail of snuff which we put in one nostril a hundred times a day?"

Silence.

"No, answer me," Achiebefuo urged him.

"It is not."

"Does that mean anything to you?"

"Achiebefuo it does."

"Yes, it does to me too, my first man. And here was our Chief, rubbing himself with excrement on the main road!"

Silence.

"My first man, Ngangabe is not the only one, he is not the first man who has done that kind of thing to our Chief. He is not the second, he is not the third" he said holding up first one finger, then two, then three. "They are many. He was not wrong to spit on the Chief's face. And by saying he was not wrong to do that, let me ask you one small question: Who gave the tax-collectors the right to question our Chief and even sit on his head?"

"Achiebefuo, we did."

Silence.

"My first man, was it for this that we showed our Chief to ***Akeukeuor***?"

"Certainly not, Achiebefuo."

"Certainly not. My first man, whose shame is that?"

"Ours."

"My first man, that again is another fault." Pause. "My first man, let us not be mad. We are not dead yet. ***Akeukeuor*** is still looking at every action of ours. Our fathers are still watching us from above. If we had been lucky to die before this year, we would have been able to tell them that the house they built and left in our hands fell when we had gone out; and that we would have been able to hold it up. Is that not what we would have told those that have gone before us?"

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"It is, Achiebefuo."

"But we are still in the house. Still here. Should we allow it to fall to the ground? If we pushed it down, it would be a different thing. But we did not. I see that it will be very wrong to let it fall and touch the ground when we still have eyes. How shall we be able to explain why we gave the uncircumcised sons of the tribe the right to rub the Chief with excrement on the main road?

A Chief we had shown to ***Akeukeuor***?'

Silence.

"My first man, if you are of one mind with me, let this stop at once." Pause. "Let us not follow a mad man into the market naked, because he has taken our loincloths. Bimobios have now made a song against Small Monje - not against Nchindia, but against the tribe of Nkokonoko Small Monje. And by the tribe of Small Monje here, I mean you and I, and those who have gone before us...

"The paramount Chief of Bimobio appeared for the big meeting in Tekwe three moons ago on a palanquin. The paramount Chief of Small Monje appeared on foot. In Bimobio and Elieuchem it is a rule that every household, every family will contribute in turns to give their Chief food, oil and money, so that he does not lose his title amongst lesser men. But in Nkokonoko Small Monje the paramount Chief begs for everything, even soap to wash his face. Do you think a Chief can ever sink below this point anywhere? And whose shame is that?"

"Ours."

"It is ours. And that ought to mean something to the two of us, even if it does not to any other person. We know that before Goment said that he was no longer going to pay our Chief as before, we were already looking for what to do with him. But as the gods of our land would have it, goment has cut those wings with which he used to fly out of our reach. And now, here we are, forcing purgatives down the throat of a man who has a running stomach. Is that right?"

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Ngobefuo shook his head.

"Yes, that is not done. Never. Nchindia has had more than his fair share. Let us call him and wash him, and make him see that the shoulder can never grow above the head. It was not for nothing that we made the eagle our emblem. We are a proud people. Let us go back to ***Akeukeuor*** and beg him to forgive us for what we have done so far. Let us sweep it again. Let us give him back his title. We anointed him, and so we still need him. My first man, that is what has driven sleep from my eyes."

Ngobefuo looked at him for a very long time without saying anything. Then he leaned forward and told him:

"My brother, I have heard everything that you have said. Go and sleep. Let me also be awake with it. You are very correct."

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Chapter Eighteen

NGOBEFUO CAME to see Achiebefuo towards the noon of the day after they spoke together about their Chief. He told him:

"Achiebefuo, I have looked at this thing from all sides, and I blame myself. Yes, I blame myself for sleeping when I was supposed to be awake. I agree with all that you said. Come, I have told the Chief to wait for us. The others are there too waiting. I have told them. They are with us. We shall do as you said, ask our Chief to be sorry. Then we shall sweep this house and wash it with a big sacrifice to atone for all that has happened. I agree with that. But when shall that be?"

"When, how, my first man?"

"The gods are still in tears Achiebefuo. And these rains will continue until the last week of the fourth moon from this."

"No matter my first man. Only let our Chief be sorry for all that he has done. After that we shall be ready to wait for eight moons until the eyes of the gods dry enough for them to see and appreciate the things we shall give to ***Akeukeuor*** to distribute to them. But while we wait, let our Chief be our Chief. When he says he is sorry we shall take him back into our hands and hold him until that day. We shall not take him from that rubbish heap and show to ***Akeukeuor***. If it is me you are waiting for, let us go."

They went and joined the Chief and the others waiting. Ngobefuo addressed the Chief:

"His highness, here we are again to talk to you about what to do. It is eight moons since we sat in this same room

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to vow that we shall never again sit in council to tell you to do this or that. We meant what we said. But today we are gathered here to break our word. We do not do that often." Pause. "And whenever we do that we usually have a very good reason."

Pause.

"This is the very good reason we have for breaking our word today. We have given you enough time to see how you could live as our Chief without our help. We have given enough time to see and know that it is not just the crown you wear on your head that makes you our Chief, but the people you have about you. And who am I calling the people you have about you?" He paused and then pointing to the various personalities, beginning from himself he said: "The people are us - Ngobefuo, Achiebefuo, Ndenwontio, Ajem-abeule, Ntongntong, Nkwinkwi and the rest. People who before you came, had always been the Chief's ears, the Chief's eyes, the Chief's feet, the Chief's shadow. People," he continued, his voice rising gradually to a very high pitch and then subsiding again until it reached the level of a whisper before he began to raise it again, "Who had always borne the Chief's horn, the Chief's stool, and the Chief's umbrella, whenever the Chief was to go on a journey.

"People who fanned the Chief while he slept, people who held the loin cloth up behind the Chief while he excreted. People who held open the legs of stubborn women for the Chief to use; people who lay down for the Chief to walk on them if he so desired. But, people whom his highness Chief Nchindia has decided for the past years to lie down so that they can walk on him! Your Highness, we have been most painfully impressed by your conduct, these five years."

Pause.

"Our people say that the tree which falls and touches the ground is the tree that grows alone. That is true. But, hear it from us today that a paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje has never thought of growing alone, until you came. That is our worry.

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"You have tried to do it. But failing, you have let yourself to fall. You, our duly anointed Chief. We have refused. We the older trees that have grown around you have decided that you shall not touch the ground." He turned round and asked: "Are my brothers with me?"

"Every single, person, "Achiebefuo answered for them all. In fact, everybody was with him.

"Your Highness, what are you hearing with?" Ngobefuo asked pulling his own ear.

"With my ears father."

"Your Highness what are you hearing with?"

"With my ears fathers."

"Your Highness what are you hearing with?"

"With my ears."

"Yes, I have asked you three times and you have answered three times too. Now we have come to give you back your title. We have come to give you back everything which had always made our Chiefs our Chiefs. We shall give ***Akeukeuor*** seven white cocks, seven black hens, a goat, a sheep, a castrated pig, one tin of oil, one tin of egusi, and three cups of salt. We shall give all these to ***Akeukeuor*** and beg him to ask all gods of this land to forgive our past and guide our future, you and us. It will be when the eyes of the gods are dry. Four moons from today. But we want to open our ears and hear his highness tell us that he is sorry for all that he has done, and promise to live only the way we want him to live."

The Chief apologised very sincerely for all his past misdeeds, saying that he had at last seen that he had really offended them. A basin of water was brought in which he washed his face, hands and feet, and returned to Ntongntong. This they all took later on into the holy grove where they emptied into the River of Forgetfulness. That meant Nchindia was back again as the announced Paramount Chief of Small Monje.

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Part Three

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Chapter Nineteen

THE GREAT sacrifice was to take place on the last day of the week in December when the weather was expected to be good. The weather had been very dry and bright the whole week. But on that day when the sacrifice was to be offered it rained so heavily that they had to put off the actual offering for another week, in spite of the preparations that had been completed. Ngobefuo took this for a bad sign, but the others did not believe him.

To the more observant people like Ngobefuo, Achiebefuo and Ndenwontio, it seemed that before December when they were to offer the great sacrifice, the Chief had suddenly and mysteriously come into money. He had begun by degrees to fall back into his old habits: doing what they did not expect him to do and not doing the things expected of him, with a highly irritating lassitude. He even had to be persuaded to attend the sacrifice which his conduct had necessitated.

Five days before the sacrifice he had decided to go down to the coast, as far as Sowa. It was his intention to find out among other things, whether Celina was still alive. If she was he would like to know why she did not reply to his letter and also what his late brother had told her. He had already been able to gather enough money with which to start a good trade if he abandoned the throne as he had planned. The moment seemed most propitious because the Elders thought they had completely subdued him. He had decided to quit Small Monje, and nothing else stood higher in his mind. So a day after the sacrifice he led Achiebefuo and a team of Elders who vowed to die by him, out of

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Small Monje to go to Sowa. He had not sufficiently explained the reason for his journey. But since he insisted so strongly, the old men were forced to permit him, knowing that he was to travel with many Elders of his council.

In Sowa he learned to his chagrin that Celina had never received any letter from him. She told him that until somebody came down from Small Monje to take over his property, they all thought he had died, or travelled to another country. He told her how he intended to abandon the office of Chief because he had suffered too much; that he had 200.000 francs on him with which he wanted to begin trading when he came down finally.

Before he left for Small Monje he had 17.000 francs in a certain contribution group they had formed. He wanted to meet the president and the treasurer and find out about the money. He was told that the treasurer had left Sowa a very long time ago. He insisted on meeting the president of the defunct group.

When they met the president told him that it had been a monthly affair, and that shortly after he left, the government had issued a decree banning any such meetings. He told the Chief that no real records were kept, and that he could hardly recall the name and face of the man who took his own share. At this stage the man had tried to move away, not knowing that the Chief had neither liked nor believed his story.

"I want my money from you," the Chief had said very angrily, pulling the man by the sleeves. "You have stolen my money. I know that's the way you people steal in this place. I want my money." The man tried to go but the Chief held him back again.

"Leave my shirt, you fool," the man told him, knocking his shirt out of the Chief's grip. Only the timely intervention of Celina and Achiebefuo prevented a fight from breaking out between the two men.

"Leave him Your Highness," Achiebefuo pleaded.

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"Don't say that, father. You cannot allow thieves to take your money away like that. Seventeen thousand francs?"

"It could be one million," the man said and tried to move away again. The Chief seized him.

"Your Highness," Achiebefuo pleaded again. "Leave this man. That your money is too small for this kind of thing."

"Seventeen thousand francs?" the Chief asked him.

"Yes, Your Highness. It is too small to pay with this."

"But I want the money."

"We shall give it to you right now. Let that man go."

"Give me first," the Chief said. He thought the old man merely wanted to prevent him from fighting. As they stood there Achiebefuo reached for a bundle of notes from inside the folds of his loin cloth, counted seventeen notes and showed to the Chief.

"Your Highness, this is seventeen thousand francs. Take. Leave him and let us go."

The following day they left for Small Monje. The Chief had also succeeded in making arrangements for his wife to go down as soon as he got back home. She was to leave with all their three children to prepare for his own coming.

The news of what Achiebefuo had done reached Small Monje before them. Many of the Elders who had gone to Sowa with them found it hard to believe their ears and had to tell the Chief from time to time to bite the edges of the money. They did not think it was genuine money at all. But it remained good money.

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Chapter Twenty

ON THE night the new council of the tribe was formed following the discovery of the theft of the statue, Ngangabe undertook personally to go round the adjoining villages, getting up people whom he knew would readily support any cause against the D.O. and the Father. That night, before daybreak, the long awaited general meeting of all the disaffected elements of the tribe was held. It took place in the *Ndie-ndee*, and Ngangabe was the spokesman. They talked at length and on very many things concerning the indignities they had suffered, and arrived at a conclusion - that every single misfortune which had befallen the tribe from the events of the last "catching ceremony" to the desecration of their god was the direct result of the presence of the D.O. on their soil, and his unwarranted interference in their personal affairs. He persuaded the other Elders to leave the execution of their punishment in their hands, as soon as Nchindia was brought back to the palace.

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Back at the D.O.'s house that same night, the Chief was suddenly full of fear. He did not know why he felt that way, but from the D.O.'s dubious handling of the case up to that moment, it suddenly occurred to him that he was not dealing with a man he could trust. His sympathy was more with the old men whom he knew would have nowhere to flee to. He could only imagine how the other Elders back in the palace would treat them when they eventually returned to answer to their charges. For him he knew he was already on his way out. However, to make the D.O. see that it would be unsafe to allow the men to return to the palace so soon, he pointed out:

"This is a very dangerous situation for everybody sir."

"What dangerous situation? There is no danger," the D.O said reassuringly.

The Chief remained silent for a very long time and then told him:

"I have to point out, sir, that you have not protected these people as you promised. Did you not say that if anything happened you would be on their side?"

The D.O. looked round at their faces. After a rather long self-reproaching silence he admitted:

"I did." Then he went on: "And even now I am still promising you. The mistake was yours. You people went too far. It is unfortunate that they discovered our trick, but remember that whatever promises I made, I am still the District Officer of Small Monje. There are certain things you don't have to say to an authority in such a gathering. It's no use recounting how you behaved and how I reacted to it. I only hope that such a thing will not repeat itself.

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What l will like you to know is that this is the moment when my duty as the District Officer of this place will come into play. I want you to see and be convinced that I am still ready to defend your rights. You will go back to the palace, escorted by my officers. Look as serious as you can. If they make any threats on you, or try to do anything funny, let me know first thing tomorrow morning, and the forces of law and order will come in."

He had been looking at the six people as he spoke, and he noticed that they had started shaking their heads in objection, long before he finished talking. There must be something he did not understand.

"What"? He asked.

"We cannot go back Goment," one of the Elders said. "We are finished."

"How?" The D.O. enquired. "Do you think they will still think so seriously of it by the time you go back?"

"We cannot go back to the palace sir," the Chief said, shaken by the D.O.'s suggestion that they go back.

"What will happen if you go back?"

"Anything can happen," an old man said.

"Nothing will happen. You will have the protection of the law. Nothing will happen to any of you in my jurisdiction, if l do not permit it. I have the men. I have the guns, and the bullets." He was talking and rising to inform them that it was all over, and that he wanted to go to sleep. He thought he had impressed them with that arrogant assurance. When he was just about to move away, the Chief said desperately:

"At any rate sir, let us stay here today. Until...." He gulped and remained silent again. He had wanted to say "until they forget." But the thought flashed through his mind that it was not a thing to forget that way. He had wanted also to say, "Until the whole matter dies down." But again he felt that it might never die down. And the D.O. was not the kind of man to house natives indefinitely. He had wanted to say a lot of things, but his mind was in such confusion

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that he ended up saying nothing. Leaving the sentence unconcluded he went on to say:

"Before dawn, everybody in this tribe shall have known about it."

"And what if they do?' the D.O. asked.

"I don't know sir, the Chief told him, his head held down in deep thought. At this moment the phone rang in the D.O.'s room. He went in to answer it. When he picked up the receiver and asked who it was, the voice said:

"Secretary General to the Ministry of Culture and Antiquities." There was a very long pause before the D.O. greeted him and asked if he could be of help. The man said:

"Well yes. I was just going over some files submitted to me a couple of days ago on a certain antiquity which was confiscated from a white man. A very huge statue. It is rumoured, I repeat, rumoured, that it came from Small Monje. Have you been informed of any such loss?"

The D.O. was silent for some time, just to make sure that he did not betray himself in his tone. Then he admitted "I heard the people here sold something of the sort. Where is the white man by the way."

"Deported."

"How did he say he got it?"

"I have not been properly informed on that. The point here is that you should put a watchful eye on things of that nature. We are trying to conserve all our antiquities."

"So what happens to the statue, then?"

"Looks like it will have to be sent back to Small Monje. I just wanted to keep you in the know of it. And the people must be warned very severely not to traffic in such things anymore." The D.O. did not hear when the voice bade him good night and hung up. By the time he returned to the parlour to meet the Chief and his Elders it was quite clear that his career was in great jeopardy. He knew that if the matter had gone that far, then the Provincial Governor must

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have been told about it. Thank God Virchow had been deported, bit what could he have told the Ministry of Antiquities? Maybe he had mentioned his name to them. But the Secretary General could have told him. He could at least have hinted him about it.

Whatever the situation was in Tetseale on the matter, he assumed that it would do him much good if he did not allow the Elders in the place to make a lot of noise about it. Everything must be done to kill the matter at his level. He would send for the statue himself and have it put back as peacefully as possible.

This was a very tragic misreading of the situation on the part of the D.O. He was still a total stranger to the laws, traditions and customs of these people over whom he had ruled for so many year. They had explained to him over and over again that the statue was their god; that he guided their everyday lives, and the like. He saw it differently, he took it for an ordinary work of art which could be moved about, sold and bought back, if one had the purse.

His background and upbringing had something to do with such an attitude. He came from the Nkwere tribe of the West Coast - the earliest of the coastal tribes to undergo the gruelling changes brought by Colonialism and Christianity. Amongst these tribes, chieftaincy and all that it stood for, belonged to the historical past. They were the first to abandon their native customs and take to the white man's "Superior" ways. Their Chief's palace, for example, called in records of the early explorers "The Quintessence of African Civilization," had been levelled down and coveted into a golf course when the D.O. was only a boy of ten. Their Chief's throne which had for centuries past been an irresistible force of attraction to explorers and scholars from all over the world, was now a monument occupying a quiet corner in the National Museum.

When Independence was "won" it was from these people who were already turning "White", that administrators were

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chosen to take the place of the white men. Since then offices of District Officers, Provincial Governors and Ministers, had become the exclusive monopoly of these coastal people. There were many like D.O. Martin ruling inland over their fellow countrymen, who had never known any change too. But many of them had already learn to adjust to the tastes of the people.

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When the Chief repeated his plea that they should be allowed to stay the night in his house the D.O. found it unwise to compel them to return to the palace. He immediately gave orders to his servant to prepare a sleeping place for them in the visitor's room, and then he went and lay down. Useless people, he thought, and closed his eyes, but sleep would not come. He got up after a while and went out to talk to the officer who guarded his compound. He reassured himself a hundred times and over, that nothing will happen to him, reminding himself every single minute, to kill the matter at every cost. As a first step towards this, he planned to go to the palace the following morning and meet Ngobefuo. If necessary, he would even beg to make them submit to his wishes.

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In the room where they were to pass the night, the Chief and his Elders were even more disturbed than the D.O. There was only one bed in the room, and the D.O. expected that they would be able to share it. If it proved too small the others could sleep on the chairs which he considered more comfortable than their bamboo beds in the palace. When the servant shut the door and went away, the old men decided that it was the Chief alone who would lie on it. They said they had slept all their lives, and that they did not need sleep on that particular night. Too ashamed even to look into each other's faces they held their heads down as they talked. For the first time they decided to look at the gravity of what they knew they had done.

They had disgraced themselves, because of a few pieces of paper called money, because of a few bottles of liquid called "strong drinks." Were they not the Elders of the tribe, the torch-bearers of their traditions? How could they have fallen so low? How could they have allowed themselves to be deceived by a mere infant of that nature? An infant who had shown that he was absolutely incapable of taking a serious look at his position as Chief! Were they ever to rise again? What of their children and their wives? What a legacy of ignominy and shame they had bequeathed to them! Ngobefuo would never pardon them. Ever. Where could he be that night? What could he be planning to do with them all? They had made a very big mistake. Lucky man Achiebefuo! He had solved the problem his own way. The best way. They had made a mistake. They had been misled.

No. They had not been misled by anybody. They had

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misled themselves. The D.O. did not know their traditions. He was an outsider. They should not have listened to him. Their Chief was still a "small boy", new to their ways, his feet still in water. They should have told the D.O.. "No, Goment." and stood by it. They should have told the Chief: "No, Your Highness," and stood by it. Nothing would have happened to them. Nothing. ***Akeukeuor*** would not have been touched. They should have been earning an honest sleep that hour, but here they were sleepless, after having murdered sleep in other people's eyes! They would follow the footsteps of Achiebefuo as soon as they had their chance.

At this point in their ruminations the Chief rose from the bed in which he had been sitting. He was going to urinate, or so he thought. The old men followed him very nervously with their eyes. They knew that whatever would be done to them, the Chief's fate directly affected theirs.

As soon as he descended the two steps at the door they rushed to the window, pulled the blind to one side and pressed their faces against the window panes. They were trying to see whether he was going far away or not. He was there, but they saw only their own images which the light in the room caused the glass to reflect. They pressed closer, using their hands to shelter and perhaps cut off the light which interfered with their vision through the corners of their eyes. Yes, he was there, standing with the loose loincloth he had thrown carelessly over his shoulders. They must watch him. He must not be allowed to go away and do anything bad to himself with that loin cloth. It was long enough to be wound into a rope!

But they did not know that the Chief was looking at them because they stood in the light and he in the dark. It was just as well they put an eye on the Chief because something had just happened which shook him to the marrow. Something which could make him desire death more than any other thing. As soon as he climbed down from the house and walked towards the kitchen where he undid his

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zip and pulled down his trousers slightly to urinate, he saw a torch flash its light towards his directions, followed by:

"Heh, where are you going, Chief?"

It was one of the policemen. The Chief did not answer until the policeman asked again. Then he told him very wearily:

"I want to urinate."

"Okay, okay," the man said and retreated to his corner directly opposite the way leading to the door of the room in which they were to spend the night.

The meaning of the officer's question came suddenly to the Chief with a stunning force. That man had been asked to keep watch over him and make sure that he did not escape! It meant that he could not escape as he thought? How then could he survive? How then was he going to leave Small Monje to join his wife and children whom he had already sent to the coast some weeks before?

He stood where he was for over ten minutes, doing nothing. He pushed his trousers right down then holding his penis in his hands pressed it from all sides, shaking it like a child. Nothing came out. That urine which had harassed him the whole evening had suddenly vanished. In its place he could feel only pain, right down at the pit of his stomach. He gave up trying to force urine out and carried himself back to the room.

As he returned, the old men rushed childishly back to their various places. He stood at the doorsteps again for a very long time, very deep in thought, before going in. The loin cloth was still over his shoulders, his zip completely down. He had totally forgotten to zip up. When he went in, he was not the same man who had gone out. In fact, he was never again to be the same man because a drastic change swept over his whole being. His attitude towards the D.O. had changed suddenly, so had his attitude towards the sale of the statue, towards the Elders, towards himself, towards everybody and everything.

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"I have not escaped, fathers, "he said as he entered the room. The people said nothing. He walked very painfully to the bed where he threw the loin cloth and, sitting down asked somebody to put out the light.

"Will Your Highness not sleep?" One of the Elders asked with genuine concern.

"His Highness will not sleep," came his retort.

"That he will not sleep?"

"He will not. Put out the light."

It constituted another cause of his worry that these old men were also keeping watch over him.

At about 3 o'clock, it occurred to the D.O., as a matter of precaution to check on them. As they usually did, the policeman might have fallen asleep, instead of guarding them. The people might have escaped to broadcast the news of what the loss of the statue had resulted in. Then the Governor would certainly get to know what part he had played in the theft! No. That must not be allowed to happen.

The six people were all there, wide awake, when he pushed open the unlocked door and introduced the light. Their eyes were glittering, some watering, none sleepy. They were all sitting the way they had sat before the Chief asked for the light to be put out. At that time the traditional loin cloth which he had thrown on the bed had been pushed to the lower edge of the bed, away from him. His hands had been placed on his chest. When the D.O. came in the old men noticed that nothing had changed from that position. When the Chief too looked over at them he noticed that their positions had not altered at all.

"You people are not sleeping?" the D.O. asked.

No answer.

"You people ought to sleep. This is nothing to make you lose even one minute's sleep. You are men, don't behave like women," the D.O. said, trying to generate confidence he did not have. The Chief turned his face from him towards the wall. He had suspected the D.O.'s intentions.

"Good night," the D.O. said.

There was no answer.

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Chapter Twenty-One

EARLY THE following morning, the D.O. left his bed when he heard that the Elders were at his gate. He was anxious to be in the best terms with them and asked the policeman to tell them to come to the house. They came up to the house but refused to go in. From the steps outside Ngobefuo greeted and immediately announced:

"We have come to tell Goment many things"

The D.O. moved nearer. The man went on.

"But first, I want to let him know our new council." He went on to name it to him. When he had finished the D.O. asked him:

"What of the one we had on records?"

"On whose record?"

"On my record - on the Government's record." At this point the Chief and his men came outside, just in time to hear Ngobefuo confirm their fears in everybody's presence.

"They have removed their names. They are no longer of us."

There was dead silence. The Chief's entry had been received without a stir, in fact, even after he had gone and sat down, the D.O. noticed that nobody looked in his direction. When Ngobefuo was sure that the criminals had settled down enough to digest his words, he made the second point - their main reason for coming there that early morning:

"We have also come to tell Goment that we have no Chief any longer."

The D.O, adjusted the waist band of his pyjamas trousers, leaned on a pole beside him and asked:

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"Meaning what?" He sounded severe, but there was an undercurrent of nervousness in his severity.

"Meaning, Goment, that we the people who catch our Chiefs, have decided to take back our respect from Nchindia Fuo-ndee Alexander who was until yesterday paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje - for reasons which Goment knows already.'

"What do you mean Ngobefuo?"

"What I have said Goment."

"You mean you have dethroned your Chief?"

"That is what I mean Goment."

There was silence. The D.O. turned and looked first at the Chief who sat staring far out into the trees, a most cadaverous hollowness in his eyes. If he had not gone out to urinate the previous night, if he had not been confronted by the officer, and if the D.O. had not come down to check on them late at night, this declaration by Ngobefuo would have come as very good news to him. After all he had just been biding his time to desert the throne. But it now seemed as if he could not be allowed to go away from Small Monje to wherever he liked. He did not say anything.

The D.O. turned to Ngobefuo and then looked away again. After a few moments' reflection he stood back, folded his hands very calmly, and said:

"Ngobefuo and the rest. Whatever you call yourselves, it is not done. You can't do it." There was in his words the kind of assumed confidence which makes speech so blandly offensive.

"What is the *it* Goment is talking about?"

"You cannot dethrone your Chief. Impossible. The law forbids it."

There was silence, then Ngobefuo asked him:

"What is Goment saying then?"

"That your Chief just has to continue to rule. It is his job."

"Rule over who?"

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"Over his kingdom."

"With all that he has done?"

"As sure as death."

"Then it must be over our death that he will rule, "Ngobefuo said, barking a deprecating laugh and spitting on the floor to show his contempt. He then climbed to the veranda and, sitting down asked the D.O. too to sit down and listen to him. The man did. He then began.

"Goment, we have a tradition."

"You have told me that a million times."

Ngobefuo paused for a minute after the interruption then he continued.

"Nchindia was not born with that title which we have taken from him. If we have caught our Chief, and we have found that he had sold our trust in him, we have the right, by all the gods of this tribe, to put him down and choose another. We had the right to choose ano...."

"Not exactly, Ngobefuo," the D.O. cut in again. "I should like straightaway to point out one or two errors you run the risk of making in this affair." Here he coughed, sat in contemplation for a while and said: "This particular Chief was not chosen by you. I chose him. Antony was your Chief. The Government chose this Chief."

Nchindia turned suddenly and stared malevolently at him at the mention of what he was now confessing he had done to Antony. The man gasped slightly with embarrassment as he recalled. He could not retract his words. Damn it he thought. Tightening his lips he went on:

"The Government chose Nchindia, and believe me, whether you like it or not, if the government has chosen its Chief, why the government has the duty to have him remain in power. You cannot harvest where you did not sow. I hope I have made myself quite clear?"

Ngobefuo smacked his lips and told him too with equal firmness:

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"We have also got to tell Goment that he made a mistake. Understand from this day that if you have been thinking that you chose Nchindia as our Chief, then you have not been thinking straight. Know it from today that if we ever accepted what you said about Nkoaleck, if we ever accepted that Nchindia should be made the Chief in his place, it was not because goment chose him. We accepted because the reasons you gave for refusing Nkoaleck convinced us. We saw for ourselves where he had slipped." He stopped talking and sat quiet for a very long time, in the hope that the D.O. would reconsider his statement and withdraw it. When the latter continued to look uncompromising he walked down and asked his men to follow him back home. Far out into the yard he turned and told the D.O.:

"Goment, when next we come here we shall be coming to tell you that the Goment's Chief will continue to stay in Goment's house and marry Goment's daughters, shall eat the Goment's food and rule over the Goment himself. Never over us."

The D.O. found this sort of threat very amusing indeed. He understood how the people felt about what happened. The situation was within his reach. He would send an officer that morning to Tetseale to arrange for the statue to be brought back, after that he would see what grounds they would have for talking so rudely to him. For the moment, he would not be too severe with them, he would only insist on the law. That should keep them quiet.

One thing was obvious, that the Chief must remain in power, even if he did not like to rule. He must be made to accept it because if he did not, that would draw attention to the issue of the statue again. The authorities in Tetseale might get to know, and that would ruin his reputation. He turned and looked at the Chief and the Elders with him. They all sat like statues.

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Their minds too were even more confused than the D.O.'s. He had suddenly become very slight to them. Was he not still the District Officer of Small Monje as he had said? Was he really as strong as he made people believe? Certainly not. He was a weakling. He should have caught Ngobefuo and Ngangabe and the whole of their council and locked them up. Or even made them swear by *Ku-ngang*, that they would do nothing to any of them. Could they continue to entrust their safety into his hands? No, if he could not protect them. That was sad. A weak man should not be wicked because he has the whole world to fight against. He was talking only of the Chief, what about them? Were they to be chased out of the tribe? They needed some protection.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

THE D.O. returned from his office at two o'clock. He packed his Land Rover in front of the house and went round to see the Chief and his clique. He was coming to tell them that through his efforts the statue was to be brought back, and that it would be reaching Small Monje the following day. He ended by saying:

"So Chief you be sure that by six o'clock tomorrow evening you will be sitting on your throne and ruling again!. They received the news with such a stony indifference that he found it best to go away.

Back up in his dining room he came to sit in front of his favourite dish - rice, stewed chicken with the salad and a bottle of red wine by the side. He did not fall on it to devour it as he had always done, but held down his head for a long time as though in prayer, until his wife came up to tell him that his child's malaria had not improved.

"You have been giving him sufficient nivaquine not so?"

"I have," she answered.

He shook his head and remained silent.

"I can take him to the dispensary tomorrow," she said.

"You can't take my child to that kind of place. You want him to catch some other disease? The nurse will continue to come and look at him in the house. He needs only one or two injections and he'll be O.K." She went back and sat down and continued with her needlework, while he pulled his chair nearer the food. He did not begin the salad as usual. He pushed the plate to the edge of the table, took a napkin and spread over his laps and grabbed his cutlery in both hands. He pulled the plate of rice towards him and put some

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in his plate. Then he began to tear voraciously at the chicken, sprinkling soup in a very unbecoming manner all over the table. After serving himself he stuck his fork and spoon into the rice, pushed the plate away and sat back, supporting his head in his hands. He had tasted nothing, he did not feel like tasting anything, but he felt hungry. His mouth tasted sour, very sour indeed. His wife had been watching him intently.

"Are you thinking about the child, master?" She asked. He looked across at her and denied with a shake of the head before looking down again.

"Then what?" She asked him worriedly, even rising and coming to stand by him.

He said nothing. He had a very difficult problem on his mind. On his way to the office he had learnt that the crisis was assuming a very frustrating complexity. The day was Saturday. It was the people's *Ale-assaa,* their market day. The day of very great rejoicing for the tribe, as he had always known it to be ever since he came to Small Monje. At eleven O'clock, when the market was supposed to be packed full, not a single soul was there. What must have kept them back? Who? Ngobefuo? Why? Was it his intention to draw outside attention to what was happening in Small Monje? That was just a means of throwing his whole future into peril! He rose to the veranda and shouted for his yard boy:

"Kunzia! Kunzia!"

The old man answered and hurried to him.

"Is it true that there was no market today?"

"Madam i say no man be for market Goment."

"Why?"

The man was silent, but the D.O. saw that there was something in his silence which he was afraid to say.

"Tell me Kunzia. You know your people".

Silence.

"If you do not tell me Kunzia, you will not work here

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again. And you will go to the police. They will beat your bottom and they will put you in prison and you will never come out again. You hear me?"

Silence.

"You hear me?"

"I hear Goment."

"Why did they not come to the market?"

"Goment," the man began very sullenly. "We pipo vely vex fo you."

"Vex for me?"

"Why? What reason have they?"

"Plenty tings Goment. Dem say mison take dem land, them talk fo Goment, no helep. Road no pass fo hoss for all man. An i spoll all the farm. Ngangabe gib mison wan lan - mison take ten. Dem talk fo Goment, no helep. Achiebefuo die, i kill i sikin, i sey Goment i killam. Chief take ***Akeukeuor*** i sellam. Dem say dem no want Chief. Dem want fo move Chief. Dem tell Goment, Goment i go gree. We pipo vely vex fo you Goment."

The D.O. was silent. He looked at the man for a long time, his annoyance was visibly clear, so was his fear. Then he asked him:

"So what do they want now, the Chief or the land?"

"All Goment."

"Rubbish. Is that how they will get their wishes? Tell them to go to hell."

"Yes, Goment, "the man said and went away to continue his work. The D.O. went after him and told him:

"Kunzia, I am just joking-eh? Let them not go to hell-eh?"

"Yes, Goment."

"But for now, go to the palace and ask Ngobefuo to come and see me here right now. The driver will take you there."

"Yes, Goment," the man agreed.

After Kunzia had explained his message Ngobefuo told him

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"Go and tell Goment that I will not come. We say we do not want our Chief, he says we must want him. We say we do not want the people who have sold our god, he says we must want them. Let him keep all of them. Go and tell him again that we have a council for this tribe. If he has anything to tell or ask the tribe, the new council is there. Tell him that the council has the mouth and ear of the tribe now. Go."

The D.O. found that if he was ever to compromise with them and prevent matters from growing worse, he would have to meet them and talk to them. He sent Kunzia with his driver to go and ask the new council to come. The man went. Talking now from a position of strength, the new council told Kunzia to go and ask the D.O. to come there himself, if he thought the matter was going to be of any benefit to them.

The D.O. condescended to go and meet them in the palace. He drove there under the sweltering heat of the sun, passing through the market. There was still nobody, neither were there any signs that anybody had been there since morning. When he came down to the palace and wanted to know whether they had changed their market day. Ajem-abeule gave a brief and noncommittal answer:

"No, Goment,"

"But today was *ale-assaa*."

"That we know," Ngobefuo said, looking away in mild reprove.

"And there was nobody in the market?"

"The council did not go to market. It was in your house," Ngobefuo said.

"And after that?"

And after I did not go anywhere," Ngobefuo said, looking into the faces of the other. They all answered too:

"Nor did we."

"Why did you not go to the market after you left my house?

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"I am not a trader," Ngobefuo told him. "I do not buy, I do not sell. And so I do not go to the market. I did not go there this morning for the same reason that I had not been going there."

"You mean you have never gone to the market before Ngobefuo?"

"Goment, if I meant that I would have said so. I do not go to market by rule."

The D.O. swallowed his spittle very loudly and turned to the others with dogged persistence:

"And you?"

"We do not,"

"And you?" He pointed to Ngangabe, the man who had been the brain behind the strike. Very early that morning, before the council had decided to go to see the D.O. he had told his agents to go round the villages, reminding natives of all their sufferings at the hands of the alien intruders. He had told them that if they refused to go to church and refused to pay taxes, the D.O. and the Reverend father would grow annoyed and so leave their land. When the D.O. pointed to him he spat: "My father has said we do not go to market Goment." He was just repeating Ndenwontio's answer. But the way he said it, the decided defiant attitude, the high pitch of his voice, the poise of the head and the insolent manner in which he snapped his lips right, turning away as soon as he uttered the last syllable, gave it an entirely different meaning. "Were you too deaf to hear what my father said?" was the only kind of interpretation that could be given to such a response. The D.O. bit his lower lip and took in a deep breath, and went on:

"Why was there nobody in the market today, I ask again?" he very carefully avoided the use of such suggestive terms as strike, rebellion and the like, which would put ideas into their heads, if he had made the mistake of thinking that there was no such thing there already.

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"Goment, if there was nobody there as you claim..."

"I am not claiming, Ngobefuo. There was nobody."

"All right, if there was nobody there today, even a child will tell us that it was because nobody had anything to buy or anything to sell. What does Goment think was the reason why people refused to go to the market?" Has Goment given us cause to stay away from market on *ale-assaa*?"

"You may have found a cause where I gave you none. There can never be any smoke without fire."

"Goment is now talking. "Ngobefuo said, nodding several times. "We want now to tell him that whatever fire there is, it is of his own making."

An ironic echo hung in the long silence that ensued. The D.O.'s heavy brows drew together in very nervous concentration. He did not like what was happening.

"Will they be present at the next market?" he asked.

"If they have reasons for going there I do not see why not."

"And you," indicating the other nine members of the council, "Will you have any reasons for going?" He pressed on. He wanted by some devious means to gauge the full extent of their grievance, so as to know what line of action to take at once. Ngobefuo said the word that was supposed to end the topic:

"Do we need to turn it into a song that if we too have a reason for going there we shall not stay back?"

They turned immediately and started poking at their pipes in silence. Childish talk, the D.O. thought, shaking his head disappointedly and leaning back against the wall behind him. He dug out a cigarette from his coat pocket and stuck it to his mouth. Lighting it he threw his head back until it touched the earthen wall. He thought of the last "catching ceremony." How had the events been reported to Tetseale? What did the Governor know about it? How much? Everything which happened in that stupid place would no

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longer remain a secret. He changed the position of his legs and then leaned on his left hand, allowing the ashes to fall carelessly and insensibly on his coat and tie.

He stared blankly at Ngobefuo.

Skeleton of a man, he thought, Scallywag. A nincompoop. When he shall have his way, when the storm in his mind shall have passed away, he will put the idiot in his right place. God's time is the best. Today for Ngobefuo, tomorrow for him. He looked at Ndenwontio and three others who sat almost in a single bunch. Why should a man not behave the way he looks? Fine old man like that. Beautiful grey hairs. He should have been passing his last days in prayer, or in peaceful sleep between the comfort of sheets, if he could afford any. But there he was, fomenting rebellion. Shame on him. They were disgracing their age and their tribe by thirsting to die a criminal's death. Yes, that was the kind of death they wanted, all of them. He would give them what they wanted.

He looked at Ngangabe. Yes, he had once tasted what he was capable of doing to him. That did not satisfy him. The prison was indeed his goal. And he meant what he was saying. Let the moment just come.

He turned to Ngobefuo again, and round at the others. Fools. They were allowing themselves to be used by Ngobefuo, that arch criminal. At their age, everybody ought to have a voice. Not an echo. They have chosen to be echoes, and have given their voices to Ngobefuo and Ngangabe. The forces of law and order shall prevail. And, whether they believed him or not, they will have to answer for it. He threw the stump of cigarette down and placed his foot on it. He took out another and stuck to his month, but did not light it. He rubbed his palms together for some time and was just going to bully them all into unconditional submission. But fears of his own position weakened him to a point that he felt he hadn't the nerve to do any such thing. He sank back into greater concentration.

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Why should they be talking now of their land when the point at stake was the statue? They were just reasoning like fowls. How was the land related to the statue? They were merely weakening their case. They did not know how much tax they would be asked to pay if the Governor got to hear that they were revolting because they wanted the Government to leave their land. Yes, their statue. What he had communicated to Tetseale the previous night and even that morning, could only hold true if nothing happened in Small Monje to attract the attention of the Government. Refusing to go to market! What stupid way of expressing discontent. What could they be planning next? Just what?

The Governor must know about it all. Yes, he must. No, he must not. How was he to explain the people's demand for the dethronement of their Chief? He was simply going to tell him that the people had risen in rebellion because he did not do that. The Governor would think that he was incapable of handling local affairs. How then was he qualified to be a District Officer? He would not make such a confession of weakness to his boss.

He must hold on. Something, anything could happen at any moment to turn the scales against Ngobefuo. He was sure of that. This has never happened before in his life. Things had always worked out in his favour. And when it did, shall he not have sold himself to his boss if he mentioned it? He would be silent over it.

What if it turned out to be too late? If the Governor did not know now, how was he going to explain when things go beyond his control? He ran his hand over his head and round his chin. The people stared on, now convinced and happy that the man was in an uncomfortable situation.

Sixty was his age, the D.O. thought again. He had served the government for twenty years. Twelve years as District Officer. He therefore needed his pension and other benefits. Nothing should be willingly allowed to happen now which

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would make him lose any of those entitlements. Nothing. He would have retired while still at Firiban, but he re-declared his age and became ten years younger. He would again have retired in Ndungbeko, again he re-declared his age. Why had he not retired then? They said they were punishing him in sending him to all those places. Did he not come out of them safely? What then was there to fear now? Nothing. Did he survive tempests at sea to come and drown in a pond?

No. Small Monje was certainly too small for him. He would tell these rebels now that if they did not stop immediately and start behaving themselves, they would all be arrested and taken to Tetseale. He sat up to say that, but changed his mind again. Sixty, that was not an age for threats and war. It was an age for compromise. An age for peaceful negotiations. He decided to negotiate first.

"My people, let us work together for the construction of this nation."

There was silence. They were not his people, they thought. He knew that himself. They were not going to work together. He knew that was not possible. So why waste his breath? And he talked of the nation! They were simply not interested in the nation. They were only interested in their tribe. They were only interested in their gods and their traditions.

"Your people must attend the next market. You must make them know that they have to. They just have to."

"By which Goment means-eh?"

"By which I mean that you," he pointed to Ndenwontio and Ngobefuo directly, "you communicate this piece of information to them. That they will have to attend the next market."

"Let us tell Goment too now that it is not done. We have never before entered people's houses to ask them to attend the market. If Goment is very anxious to see people in the market, Goment himself should go into the villages and ask them to attend."

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The D.O. turned to the others.

"Our tongue is in his mouth," somebody said, referring to Ngobefuo. The D.O. mopped the sweat from his face, licked his thick lips and in a quavering voice asked:

"Please, what is it you want, you people?"

All attempts to keep anger and panic out of his voice failed.

There was silence.

"Let me really know what you want. Please tell me."

"You know what we want. We said we do not want our Chief any more. You said we must like him. Let him come back to us now. If you do not want us to dethrone him, let him come back. Our Chief has never ruled us from outside. Let him come. After that if we still have anything, we shall tell you. It is only through him that we shall talk to you."

"It is only after that we shall tell Goment whether we shall go to the market or the market shall come to us," Ngangabe stepped in. There was a very long silence and then Ngobefuo continued from where he had been interrupted:

"This is how it has always been. We have always worked through our Chiefs."

"But you said you did not want him anymore."

"And did you agree?"

"I want to negotiate with you through you, Ngobefuo...."

"Ngobefuo is not the Chief," Ndenwontio said.

"But he has always acted at the..."

"Goment, you have been told that Ngobefuo is not a Chief,"

Ngangabe told him in throated anger.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

THE D.O. reached home completely exhausted. The following day was Sunday, the day when the statue was to reach Small Monje. He looked forward to its arrival with a very disturbed mind. The thought of his own doom which had begun to etch itself with uncanny clarity frightened and weakened him more and more. He said nothing to the Chief and the others about his mission to the palace. Instead he called them together and tried to cheer them up:

"That statue should reach us tomorrow."

The people looked most unimpressed by the news. And their attitude did not alter when the following day he came in and announced that it had been safely brought back. When he suggested to the Chief to join him in some sort of ceremony he had arranged for its return to the palace he declined. The old men had said that their kinsmen in the palace would not receive it back, but the D.O. had not believed them. The Chief too said the same thing. He told the D.O. to take it back there first, and see the people's reactions before asking him to go there.

"They cannot accept the statue without their Chief," the D.O. told him.

"If they want to accept their statue, they will accept it, even without me. They were here to tell you that they don't want me. You heard them. And it was Ngobefuo who said it. They don't want me."

"And do you think he was serious?"

"He has always been serious," the Chief told him.

The D.O. reflected for a while and then said:

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"Chief, don't try to make my work difficult. If you begin to think in that manner, how then shall we be able to impose your authority on them? Where there is a will, there is always a way. Give yourself that will-power. Believe that you have the protection of the law. I have said it before, that you are still the Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje."

"Go with any of these people. If they ask you why I have not come, tell them that I am coming soon. Tell them that..."

"And do you think that will convince them? What they want now is their statue. Not me. If they accept it they will be able to accept me back. I cannot go now," he said very decisively.

The D.O rose and, trusting in his eloquent logic, he packed the statue into the back of his Land Rover, took four policemen with him and they drove off to the palace.

Up at the junction that branched into the little parish he met Father Preston. It was eleven O'clock, and he was supposed to be in church saying mass, but there he stood in his cassock, looking up and down. The D.O. stopped and greeted:

"Good morning Father."

"Thanks Martin, how are you this morning?"

"Not so bad," he replied very insincerely and asked: "And you?"

The man shrugged. Then as the D.O. drove away he waved to him to wait for a while. Moving up to him he asked:

"Has the D.O. noticed anything?"

"In what respect?"

"I have been in the church since six in the morning, but not a single soul has shown up for mass. And I haven't seen anyone pass by. I was just thinking of going down to the village." The D.O. himself had been driving the Land Rover. He turned off the engine and climbed down, his face running

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through a million different expressions in one split second. Afraid, annoyed, tired, and confused, he fumbled for a cigarette in the case inside his breast pocket. When he took it out and tried to light it, Father Preston pointed out to him that he was trying to light it from the filter end. He changed the ends at once but instead of lighting it he leaned on the vehicle and asked:

"Is it that they refused to come to church or what?"

"It sure is because not a soul was there, it's most unusual."

"What can be wrong then?" he asked, feigning ignorance to console himself.

"I was just going to ask you. It is five hours now since I started expecting to see at least one man. And as you can see there doesn't seem to be any signs anywhere that they would come."

The D.O. drew him aside and told him: They seem to be angry, or something of the sort.

"Angry?"

He nodded.

"Why" With whom?"

The D.O. took him to the back of the Land Rover and pointed at the statue between the officers. He then went on to tell him the story of how a certain white man bought if from the Chief, and how the whole tribe was now enraged by the fact that the Chief sold it without their knowledge. He told Father Preston how at his own expense he had managed to get the statue back from the white man and was going to give them. He told Preston about the previous day, that they refused to go to the market.

Preston said he had also heard from one of the boys that there was no market that Saturday. But he said he had not tried to find out why. He described the protest, or strike or whatever it was as "absolutely unnecessary, stupidly heathen and unpardonable." When he was told how the people had even risen to demand the dethronement of their Chief he

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was surprised that the D.O. had not accepted. He said the demand was a move in the right direction "the Chiefs had always been the back-bone in the acquisition and preservation of statues... Usurping the Almighty God's allegiance." He advised the D.O. to use brute force.

"You are right, Father," the D.O. answered. "I know how much we lose in terms of prestige by the continuous presence of these so-called Chiefs. The Government no longer pays them even. But we cannot rule without them. The people are so used to the idea of having Chiefs. The only thing is that we shall gradually diminish their social importance as we are doing now. At some future date there will be no such thing as Chief anywhere in this country."

The man nodded.

"But for now we shall give them this thing, and their Chief, if they guarantee us his safety."

"Safety? Why safety?" Father Preston was surprised.

"These people can do anything Father." He could now feel the unnecessary self-deceit in continuing to insist that the Chief was not in danger.

"Martin, they can't do anything. They don't even need that statue at all. These are exactly those things which have made it almost impossible for Christianity to take firm roots in this part of Africa." The D.O. agreed but insisted that it was necessary for them to have it back if he was to rule in perfect peace. He managed too to convince Father Preston to accompany him to the palace to give it back. Preston agreed mainly because it gave an opportunity to deliver a fiery sermon on the dangers of adhering to false gods, at the most appropriate moment.

When they reached the palace the main gate was shut. The D.O. horned several times before climbing down. He heard noises down in the compound, but nobody came up to meet him. He felt the gate. It was not only closed. It was bound with fetters from top to bottom. He horned on until

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a man appeared at a veranda. Preston called for the man. When the man came up to the gate the D.O. told him that he wanted to speak to Ngobefuo and his council.

The man returned a few minutes afterwards without Ngobefuo. Ngobefuo needed to know whether their Chief was with the D.O., the man reported.

"He will be coming later," the D.O. said. " But we have brought back the statue. Open the gate," the D.O. ordered.

The man told him they were under an oath not to touch it.

"What exactly is happening?" Preston asked. He knew nothing of what had already transpired between the D.O. and the people. He found it hard to believe that the gate could be shut against the District Officer, and he would take it so lightly. He was even more surprised that the D.O. would insist on giving them back something they did not seem to need any more. Something which in his considered opinion ought to have been seized and destroyed long ago. He shook his head and remained silent thereafter. Such an attitude, he thought, merely confirmed his opinion of the African as a man who would never learn to make life better for himself. He was only annoyed that he was compelled to witness the scene, since he had come in the D.O.'s vehicle.

While he stood there looking at the D.O., Ngobefuo came up with some of his tribesmen. When the D.O. asked him to open the gate he said:

"It is our talk that will open the gate, but first, where is the Chief you said is out here?"

"Your Chief is coming. But we have successfully brought back your god. It is here." He walked to the back of the Land Rover and asked the officers who bore it to bring it down. As the men did so Ngobefuo threw his hands on his head and asked aloud:

"Goment, is that **Akeukeuor**?"

"Oh it is" the D.O. began ecstatically, but stopped short when Ngobefuo turned his back and asked the men who had come with him to follow him back down into the palace.

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Some went with him, but three men hesitated. To these the D.O. tried to explain the elaborate plans he had made for a ceremony which would accompany the installation of the statue in the shrine. The people allowed him to talk, but in the end they made it clear to him that the statue could never be theirs again because it had been defiled. They told him that nobody would ever think of worshipping it anymore, so there was no use even taking it into the palace. At this point, visibly trembling, the D.O. pleaded:

"Please, my people, take it. Just take it and leave it in there for the sake of taking only. I would not like anything to occur to divide us. We have worked together peacefully for too long a time."

"We are under oath Goment not to touch it. It will really be a bigger curse to our tradition if we take it back. The tribe does not want it."

"What does it want then?"

"Our Chief, Goment."

"When we give you back your Chief, will you harm him?" the D.O. asked. He immediately hated himself for that question.

"How can we harm our Chief, Goment?"

"What punishment do you people have for people who have committed such thing?" He did not want to use the word "crime."

"What thing Goment?"

"I mean the thing you say your Chief has done that you say you don't want him anymore."

"It is not what we say our Chief has done. It is what our Chief has done."

"Okay, for what he has done. What will you do to your Chief for what he has done?"

"Goment, it is our fathers who tell us what to do in such a case. We cannot know because this kind of thing has never happened before."

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While they stood talking Ngobefuo emerged from one of the huts and asked the people what they were doing after he had asked them to return with him. They dispersed hurriedly. The D.O. and his officers remained silent until they disappeared into the palace. It was Father Preston who spoke He pointed out cynically:

"I don't know what this means to you, Martin, but an Englishman would call this a rebellion against authority." The D.O. took in a very long breath and admitted:

It looks like it, and it is Ngobefuo who is at the root of it."

Father Preston smiled drily and asked:

"Are you not supposed to be the supreme authority in the administration of this district?"

"I am, Father."

"And you allow your authority to be slighted to this extent? We seem to see things differently. This is an insult on your position."

The D.O. nodded and sighed.

"You have the emergency powers and the discretion, or so I thought, to judge what is good for them, in the interest of peace."

"I do, Father."

"I therefore think that the security of your job here demands the immediate arrest and detention of such people. Give orders for that to be done. We should not even be talking to them over the fence. And see how they went off!"

The D.O. smacked his lips and remained silent. He could no longer tell what was good for his office. He lacked even the voice to give an order. He coughed loudly, and told the man:

"I am no coward Father. We must be tactful. Cut down the gate, enter the palace and shoot them down. That way we solve nothing. Small Monje is not just this fence, it is a very large..."

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"Then see, Father, how many people we shall have to shoot down in order to keep peace! If you want to eat with a devil, you must use a long spoon. Let them just go on. My boss will have to hear about it first of all. It is only after I have heard what he has to say that I shall act." He shook his head in embarrassing silence. That decision to appeal to his boss sounded in his own ears like a private knell of total failure. They drove back to his house with the statue.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

ASSURED THAT people were not going to be present for mass that morning, Father Preston did not see any pressing need to go back to the Parish. He agreed with the D.O. that they should go together and meet the Chief. He looked very furious about what was happening. One of the things which irked him most was the thought, the prospect of failure of their mission in Small Monje. He could not understand how after hundreds of years of selfless missionary work, the people of Small Monje could still contemplate boycotting church services. And even more sickening was the D.O.'s total ineptitude, his utter tactlessness in handling the situation. It was now obviously going to disrupt his own activities in Small Monje.

The church had long discovered that its job would be a lot easier if it stopped being hypocritical and openly worked under the umbrella of the politicians. As an honest soldier of Christ, therefore, Preston found that by reading sinister motives into the people's continuous possession of, and respect for heathen things, the church could wipe out heathenism from the surface of the earth. He was therefore determined to persuade the D.O. to be absolutely ruthless in treating the natives whom he described as "an infinitesimal minority of misguided subversionists."

But the D.O. had his own ideas. He advised perpetual caution, trusting in the chance that, in the interim, something unforeseen might happen to make the consequences easy for him to bear. He carefully hid the real facts of the crisis from Preston.

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When he got home and called the Chief to talk to him alone, he became even more frustrated. The problem had reached a stalemate for both of them. The solution, if it was possible, lay in the Chief's return to the palace to meet his people. To this end, the D.O. therefore vowed to strain every nerve, and resist any opposition to the last atom of his strength. He certainly feared for the Chief's life, and knew that if anything happened to the Chief, the truth of his implication in the sale of the statue would be made known. He would lose his job, or his reputation! But he decided that the Chief must go back. He did not know by what miracle he was going to be able to re-instate the Chief, but he talked to him at length, reassuring him after every statement, of his perfect safety. Then he ended with:

"So the long and short of what I am saying is that you will have to be taken back to your people, under very heavy guard. And the officers will remain there with you to protect you until you are fully re-instated as the Paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje, now."

The Chief did not answer. The question of his resignation thus seemed definitely out. He was too heavily guarded to contemplate any escape. The D.O. did not want him. The D.O. had deliberately refused to appreciate the seriousness of his predicament, at least to the best of his knowledge. And yet the same D.O. wanted him to be re-instated as Chief. Why? There was something the D.O. stood to gain, he thought, by continuously wanting to have him remain in power. He did not know what that was, but he felt he would not willingly allow himself to be used for the benefits of somebody who had shown that he was not his friend. The D.O. had himself disclosed how it was he who caused the rejection of Antony, his dear brother. And all those lies he had told about how he used to share the same bed with Antony!

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And, as the old men had voluntarily told him, the D.O. had intercepted his letters to his brother, thereby cutting him off permanently from the only person he most needed to hear.

For the first time since the discovery of the missing statue and their subsequent departure to the D.O.'s house, the thought of his wife and children left his mind. He thought of nothing else but death as the solution to all the torture. He would frustrate the D.O.'s plans, even if it meant dying. And since this was so obvious, there was no reason why he should not ask the devil whatever he felt like knowing.

"I wrote a letter to a certain Celina Feyi once. I wrote another letter too to my brother Antony. Did you ever see any of them sir?" he asked the D.O.

The D.O. decided to be angry.

"How does that arise now?" he asked in a loud furious voice. "Even if I did, we have a crushing issue at hand now. You seem to ignore that and talk of letters. Let by-gones be by-gones. First things first. We should only be concerned with how best to make you a man of your people again."

"I don't want to be a man of my people. I shall never again be a man of my people. I don't want to be Chief. Not me."

"Have you abdicated then?"

"Yes, I have."

"Not while I am still the District Officer here, let me tell you at once," he said and rose immediately and went to call the officers who were to guard him back to his throne.

Nchindia remained seated, in morose silence. Even from youth, he had never been an impressive figure in terms of physique. He was now thirty-two, and everything that had happened to him had taken its toll on him. He now looked like a chronic dysentery patient. His fingers had totally lost their grip, his mouth fell open on its own accord at an

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uncomfortable pace, his cheek-bones grew more and more pronounced every day, and in his sunken eyes a painful, faraway look had implanted itself indelibly.

When the D.O. rose to go and give his final orders for his departure he suddenly became nauseous. He cleared his throat, brought the phlegm to his mouth, and spat it out carelessly. The thick yellow mucus did not fall out through the window as he had intended. Actually the window was shut. The mess dashed itself against the window pane and then began to crawl down the glass most indecently. A good quantity of it had not been heavy enough to go as far as the window. It had fallen on the floor just in front of him, and from it hung a thin film of spittle which settled in a straight line up the left leg of his pair of trousers. He did not wipe his mouth. Perhaps it did not even occur to him that there was anything amiss. Neither did he notice that there was anything lying on the floor from his mouth. Perhaps he thought he had merely breathed out some air.

Sitting back, he tried to feel more comfortable by crossing his legs. But before one leg touched the other, he could feel the back vein of his left leg grind excruciatingly against the virtually naked knee-cap of his right leg. Between the two limbs there was nothing like flesh. Just a portion of the legs of his jeans.

When the D.O. returned with his armed officers and called for the Elders behind the house, Nchindia stood up and felt his waist. There was a very big gap between his body and the waist lining of his pair of trousers. It was the same pair of trousers which had fitted him so well barely a few days before. He told Father Preston when he came up to try to talk to him that he was not ready to discuss anything with him. When the D.O. came back with the old men behind him, Nchindia spoke his last words:

"I am ready sir, let's go."

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They left. The driver made two trips. First he took the Chief, the old men and the officers whom he left at the gate into the palace. He then went back for the D.O. and Father Preston.

When the D.O. came and reached the gate into the palace he halted and horned several times, then they all waited. Ngobefuo sent somebody to go up and find out whether their Chief had come with him. The man went back and told him that the Chief was there. Climbing up to the gate with the members of his new council Ngobefuo gave orders for the gate to be cut open. He thanked the D.O. and Father Preston dismissively, suggesting that they had done their duty and that they could then go back. As the Chief and the other treacherous Elders filed past them at the gate to go down, they all greeted the officers who walked by them with intense ironic ceremony—bowing right down to their knees. There was a general sense of relief.

But just when that atmosphere of doubt and apprehension was about to disappear, Ngobefuo threw in some gall. He spoke to the officers in their local dialect. When they said they were not understanding him, he said, doubling up with derisive laughter, that he thought they were all of one blood since it was now the government that took care of their traditional ruler.

"Are you going to re-install the Chief right now?" the D.O. asked.

"Not now, Goment. It will take a little time Goment," Ngobefuo told him. "Many things will have to be done first. When a Chief has left his chair for some time like this, something has to be done first." At this juncture, when the D.O. asked Preston whether they should wait and see the Chief restored, the man made the sign of the cross and told him that it would be mortal sin for him to take part in such a fetish. The old men heard him condemn them so uninhibitedly, and nodded silently. There were others who had even said that Preston had actually taken part in the

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theft and transportation of the statue. Thoroughly assured that the Chief was going to be restored the D.O. went back with Preston.

Ngobefuo gave orders for the statue to be left at the gate. The policemen who had borne it did not like the idea of leaving it there, but did not argue with him. They descended into the palace. There they did not go to the *Ndie-ndee* as the Chief and the men had expected, if Ngobefuo was sincere about his promises to the D.O. The door itself into that hall was barred. Ngobefuo led the way to the *atem* at the back of the palace where commoners usually held their own deliberations. There Ngobefuo told the officers to leave them alone and go back.

They would not go. They told him they had orders from the D.O. to be there until the Chief had been fully restored.

"When will that be?" Ngobefuo asked them.

"That's what we are waiting for," one of the officers said.

"Then wait for us to clean the Chief's chair. Or you know how to clean it? If you can clean it do so for him to sit on and you go back." The men said nothing more. At four O'clock suspicion began to thicken. Ngangabe suddenly arrived with a gang from the village. Until he came nobody amongst the traitors and the officers had noticed that he was not there with the rest of the Elders. Those he came with from the village included many faces that were familiar to the Chief. There was for instance Ntiolebin, who, like Ekwon, Amoden, Jonga and Swako who were also present, had been introduced to the Chief very early in his reign as people who rid the tribe of impurities. They were responsible for carrying out any punishment that was to be meted out to anybody who defiled the tradition. If it amounted to grass-cutting, they showed the culprit where to work and they supervised it to the end. They were in the forefront of the group which had come from the village to ask him to go and tell the D.O. to leave their land.

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There was also Nsongbeh, in his early fifties. He was the man who had become catechist after Ngangabe declined the post and resigned to join the people's protest against the mission. He had long stopped going to church and had once become an eminent traditional healer. Beside Nsongbeh stood Ateba. He had heard of the call only that morning, but he had jointed the others with enthusiasm because he too had a grievance against the D.O. He had been going to market with his four wives one Saturday morning when they ran into the D.O.'s Land Rover, stuck in the mud. The D.O. and his wife were sitting comfortably inside.

The policeman with the D.O. forced him and other men who passed by to help push it out of the mud. He was pushing from a position directly behind the back wheel. When the Land Rover took off, the tyres turned violently and splashed much mud on him. The mud splashed on him and others but he, perhaps, had been the only one who was going to the market to collect his debts. He had to go back home to change his clothes. When the Land Rover eventually came out, he begged the D.O. to carry him back since he was going the same way. The D.O. refused, saying that private passengers were not allowed to drive in government vehicles. Ateba had to walk back home and before he returned to the market, none of the people who had asked him to come for his money that day could still be found. He only heard that they came looking for him and he had gone away. He had never forgiven the D.O. since then.

There were about thirty people in all. They all carried swords. Biongong custom always demanded that during an important occasion. The swords were sheathed by their side. Some people were carrying calabashes of water and palm wine. Others carried drums and several other types of musical instruments. They looked very calm and did try to smile from time to time, but the officers and the Chief could

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sense an intensely frightening chill exuding from their entire fierce bearing. This atmosphere of brutish suspicion Ngobefuo did nothing to destroy. He instead came and stood deliberately between the culprits and the officers, making it impossible for the latter to find out from the former if they were familiar with what was happening; making it impossible for the culprits to tell the officers, had they wanted to, that the new men were most likely to be their executioners. On the part of the Chief, he was in his most incommunicable state. This silence the officer took for a sign that there was nothing to fear.

They walked to the gate where Ngobefuo spoke to Ndenwontio and Ajem-abeule and asked the two to supervise the standing arrangements. Three men from the village came first, followed by two of the culprits, and then three men from the village again. Seeing that he was about to be isolated from the rest, the Chief instinctively tried to step forward and join the two old men who had been torn away from him. He even thought he was making their job easy by walking up himself. Ntiolebin held him by the collar of his brownish-white nylon shirt and pulled him back to where he had been standing. That was most unexpected, and it sent a cold shiver down the spine of everybody who noticed it. It was the first time anybody who had ever sat on the throne as the Paramount Chief of Nkokonoko Small Monje had ever been touched so disrespectfully on the collar by anybody not of royal blood, and for any reason other than affection! It was a sign of worse things to follow, but Nchindia reacted to it placidly, as though it was meant to be a compliment. The man in him had died.

Ngobefuo shook his head sadly, and turned back towards the palace. The officers who had so far not understood anything about what was going on ran after him and asked him where they were to go from there. They were frightened by the way the Chief had been treated. Ngobefuo wasted no time in telling them:

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"To cleanse the throne. We are going to where they cleanse the throne of our Chiefs." Then very calmly he told them: "If you want to go, find yourselves places among the people. You can come to see how we do it. Or, if you like, you can come and remain in the palace with Ndenwontio, Ajem-abeule and me, until they return." The officers refused to remain with him behind. He had known before asking that they would not accept. When they said they would all go with the Chief, Ngobefuo turned back and decided that nobody was remaining in the palace. This was not a change of plan because it had long been decided that they would all be present at the ritual up in the hills. Ngobefuo was merely teasing the officers.

In a ghastly silence Ngobefuo led the way in the long march. They followed a most complicated route, along winding paths, tumbling over rocks, resting from time to time and drinking some water and some palm wine, until they came to the entrance into an enormous cave near the summit of the highest of the ranges they had climbed. Both the cave and its surroundings did not seem much of an unused place. But it looked as though it had been deserted for some time. The tall elephant grass had, however, been cut down, and it seemed obvious that it had been cut down in preparation for that afternoon.

A semi-circle was formed at the mouth of the cave with the Chief and the five treacherous Elders in the middle, all behaving as if under the influence of some opiate. A large fire was lit. There was some drumming and some dancing and singing, but the faces of the dancers were pervaded with the most solemn expressions. Then matters reached a sudden climax! After some fifteen to twenty minutes of dancing, Ngangabe and some ten other men held the Chief and the old men with him and led them into the cave. The men obeyed Ngangabe without a word of protest. When they were about some five yards into the cave the officers

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came to themselves. One asked the others whether they were not neglecting their duty to protect the Chief by allowing him to go unguarded into such a place with such fierce-looking people. Taking the cue the other two policemen turned at once and marched towards the entrance into the cave where their progress was somehow blocked by the mob crowding there. They literally fought their way through because everybody was intent on preventing them from entering.

The cave was not sufficiently lit inside. And as more and more people piled up at the entrance, the fire that originally lit the cave from the outside was completely blocked off. The officers had to stand still for a couple of minutes to get used to the semi-darkness in which they found themselves. True to their fears, when their eyes cleared they saw the Chief in a suspicions situation. He was standing in front of Ajem-abeule and Ndenwontio. The other Elders were behind him and they all held their heads down, responding to some solemn interrogation. About ten men stood over them with drawn swords! The officers took five long strides and were almost in front of the group when a quavering voice rang out:

"Who that?" It was Ngangabe's voice. They had been so involved in that part of their ceremony that he had no heard the men warn them from outside that the officers had come in.

"What are you doing with the Chief like that? What do you mean to do?"

"Go back," Ngangabe shouted.

"Why?" the officer enquired in a tone that was sure to rouse every true Biongong to the last pitch of frenzy.

"We say, go back." Ngangabe snarled again, trembling with hate and fury. The officer held up his revolver in the shaft of light that stole in over the heads of the people at the mouth of the cave. He wanted them to see what they meant. Then he told Ngangabe who had suddenly moved

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and taken Ajem-abeule's place in front of the Chief:

"Leave the Chief and those men and take them all out at once - otherwise I will shoot you all."

Ngangabe and his men felt blood rush into their eyes. Even at that most critical stage of their relations with their Chief and the D.O. the D.O.'s men still had the audacity, the effrontery, the cheek, to question and give orders in their cave! That was too much for anybody who had anything against the D.O. to bear with any amount of patience. A very long minute of stupefied silence followed. The dividing line between life and death grew thinner. Then all in a flash it vanished.

"Shoot him Goment let me see," Ntiolebin shouted throwing and crashing a boulder he had managed to lift up, against the officer's up-raised hand that held the gun. It felled the latter, his revolver exploding under him and killing him instantly. War broke out.

The second officer, stepping back from his fallen friend, held his gun in both hands and shot wildly in the direction of Ngangabe. He did not notice that the man had escaped from where he was when they struck his partner. He was shooting in self-defence, but that did not prevent the very first bullets that rang out from planting themselves on the Chief's skull, felling him on Ajem-abeule. At the same time, two of the Elders who were to be executed fell dead. Then he ran out of bullets. Ngangabe dived forward with his sword but missed him, and falling against the wall broke the weapon. He felt blood oozing from his left eye. When he dived forward towards the officer, the latter flung his empty gun into his face and that wounded him.

He struggled to his feet and wiped the blood. The officer was now left alone for the people had not allowed his third comrade to enter. Other things remaining equal he would have proved more than a match for the whole pack of villagers because he had never taken his judo and karate

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lessons lightly. But other things were not equal. The cave was dark. Even for the experts in karate, a fighter has first to see the opponent to win. He needs to see an opponent make a move in a certain direction in order to dodge. So this unfortunate man had first to see somebody throwing a stone, to dodge. He needed to see somebody aim a blow at him, to ward it off. And in that darkened cave one counted more on luck than on anything else. As it turned out luck ran out on him.

Once the people started charging in, he saw nobody to the extent of actually striking a blow. But they smelt him to his corner. Stones, swords and jugs of wine were hauled at him from all sides until he turned to run out. Everybody outside had responded to the call of the exploded gun in the cave and came charging in. Nobody knew who was struggling at the door to get out until the officer showed his head. They seized him immediately and brought him down to the ground, striking him from every visible angle until he stopped breathing.

The remaining officer outside raised his gun and was blowing his whistle as he tried to force his way into the cave. The mob fell on him too. He miraculously managed to escape from their grip, losing his gun, cap, shoes and whistle. The mob pursued him to the top of the hill and would eventually have caught him, but they were called back. And even then, not everybody returned. Some people still continued to chase him, sworn to tearing him into pieces, unless he flew back to the D.O.'s house.

As soon as they were all assembled once more Ngangabe counted the casualties. The Chief and three of the culprits had died, none of them in the fashion they had intended for them. Ajem-abeule and Ntiolebin were seriously wounded. He gave orders for the drums to beat again - to the rhythm of the music of their land. The drummers seized their instruments immediately and began. He gave orders for more

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grass and sticks to be put into the fires. His will was done. Then in a ghoulish ritual that followed, the two surviving culprits were led back into the cave and hacked to pieces, along with other four corpses. That was how they had meant to treat the bodies of the criminals before they were interrupted. Ngangabe then stepped forward and spoke. He did not speak with a human voice. It sounded like an echo from the heart of the jungle - the blood-curdling roar of a tiger that stood on its hind legs, calling itself a human being. He was now himself. For once he had found himself in a position of influence, in a situation he had looked forward to all his life.

"We have lost our land," he roared. "We have lost our god. We have lost our Chief. And we have lost our brothers. All because of Goment."

"And Father," somebody added significantly.

"And Father," he answered, wondering why he had not started with that name. "Is there anything we have to lose again?"

"Nothing," they all cried, brandishing their weapons, flexing and unflexing their muscles. He waited for the drums to beat loudly before dying down again to allow him to speak. When they did he began again:

"I am asking you as a people who were once free to excrete in your own houses. Is there anything we have to lose again?"

"Nothing," they cried again, moving away. Ngangabe begged them to listen to his word. Before he delivered it he told Ngobefuo and the other old men to hurry back and wait for them in the village. Not in the palace. As they rose he waved to the drummers to beat for some time again. They did. Then he spoke:

"We have killed Goment's people. We did not ask them to come. So we are not sad that they are no more. They started it. They drew the first blood. Goment will not leave

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us, although it is he who is owing us. One has escaped. Whether he will know. We do not care to know. But let us not wait for Goment to come and find us. Let us find him first. And wherever we reach, whether it is his house, or his work place, or mison, if only we still have our hands and our eyes with us, let us do such a thing there that if Goment runs to Tetseale and tells them, Tetseale will know that our land is only for us."

He stopped talking and marched up to the bleeding corpse of the officer at the entrance into the cave. Stooping over it he tore off his uniforms and shuffled them on, not caring which buttons fitted which holes. He was telling himself as he did so:

"If it is this thing which makes this man as bad as this, let me be bad. I must be wicked too."

They then descended from the hills, sending some people to announce in all the villages of the tribe that war had been declared on the D.O. and Father. They proceeded by the shortest route to the D.O.'s residence. At the outskirts they thought of the dog.

"Leave it to me alone," Ngangabe told the man who raise the point. "Is that not the dog in whose house I slept? It will still know me. If it does not, this one will tell him who I am, or this one." He was talking and lifting first his club and then the machete he took from somebody to replace his broken sword. They broke up into smaller groups. One group was to go with Ngangabe. Two other groups were to wait. Depending on how Ngangabe waved to them outside, one of the groups left at the gate was to follow them in. If the second group went in, the third was to wait until that second group gestured for them to move in. That third group would march off to the Mission and do its worst. All these precautions of breaking up into groups were to safeguard against officers coming along and surprising them in a bunch without their having achieved anything. If one group were ambushed now, they still counted on others.

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Ngangabe stepped forward, looked first at one end of the yard and then at the other. There was no sign of anybody, no sign of the dog either. He marched furiously across the flower beds, dragging a huge club with him, his machete dangling eagerly by his side. Six more men followed suit, all armed with lethal weapons. He climbed to the veranda, leaned his club against the wall by the door and knocked. He was so angry that he ceased to be afraid of anything.

The absence of the Land Rover signified that the D.O. was not at home. Even the officer who guarded his compound had been withdrawn by him and sent to find out what was going on with the Chief in the palace. But the D.O.'s wife was in. She was at the kitchen at the back of the house when Ngangabe knocked furiously at the door. She hurried to the door and saw Ngangabe in a policeman's uniform. Her blood chilled in her veins. She tried to retreat. Ngangabe had not come on a friendly visit. There was only one thing on his mind - revenge. He had come to kill and he gave notice of that to the rest of his gang instantly. He took two steps towards the woman who tried futily to do the only thing possible under the circumstances - to lock the door. She leapt forward for the knob and pulled it, thus bringing her helpless self within striking distance of her foe. Seized with an evil mania, the wicked frenzy of a man who had on his mind a load of a century's grievances to shake off at one blow, Ngangabe raised his club and brought it down on the woman.

Had Ngangabe done nothing else, and had somebody gone up to the D.O. to inform him of the murder of his wife, that one act would have been enough to send him packing out of Small Monje - for good. But, as revenge knows no bounds, he did not stop there! He told the group outside the gate to go straight to the D.O.'s office -at once. Then, stepping over the battered corpse he ordered the six men who had accompanied him to charge in. This they did.

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Book shelves, cupboards and anything else they found standing up were brought down. They moved from room to room and when they reported that three children were in one of the rooms, Ngangabe pushed his malignity to a degree that shocked his comrades. A gallon of kerosene was poured on the innocent children and also on the foam mattress on which they were lying. Then he lit a match, threw on the bed and locked the door behind him. He sprinkled kerosene on every combustible material in every room.

Before he left the compound, the D.O.'s mansion which barely ten minutes ago stood glittering in the evening sun, had been transformed into a veritable inferno.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

ONE HOUR after the party had departed for the hills with the Chief, the D.O. arrived at the palace gate. He was coming to find out whether the Chief had been restored. He had again brought back their statue, so they should have no reason for not restoring the Chief, he told himself. If they were still reluctant to restore him, he would immediately order their arrest. He would wait no longer.

When he looked down the palace there was no sign of any life. He descended and looked round. The entrance into the main hall was barricaded. He walked round to the back, but there was still no sign of anybody. He decided to go back to his Land Rover, bewildered with panic. As he climbed out of the gate his eyes fell on the statue. It had been abandoned by the gate. He hurried back and came to where it was lying and stood over the ungainly object for a very long time, wondering what could have happened to the Chief. Now afraid that even his own life might be in danger he ran out of the palace and drove to Father Preston's house. There he told the worried man that he had not seen the Chief and the officers he had left to guard him; that the statue was still lying at the gate into the palace, and that the whole palace was deserted.

Father Preston wanted to see the palace for himself, so the two drove back there again. As soon as they climbed down the D.O. pointed to the statue. Preston did not look disturbed by the fact that it had not been touched. It was the fact that the palace had been totally abandoned that frightened him. He smacked his lips and the two walked

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back up silently. The D.O. climbed the Land Rover and pressed the horn. He did not know why he was horning, but Preston did not ask him. Nor did he stop. He horned and horned until he felt tired and withdrew his hand, drove first to one end of the road and then across to the other. He saw nothing that he was looking for. As soon as he came and halted, Preston pointed out:

"These people must be planning or doing something evil, wherever they may be with the Chief. If it comes to anything really serious these officers you have here wouldn't be enough. Don't you think?"

"They will not be enough," the D.O. said almost to himself. "Yes, they will not be enough. Something has to be done. I will put the Provincial Governor in the know of what is happening. All these gangsters will be arrested. I will bear it no more."

They then climbed into the Land Rover and drove off. They were going to the D.O.'s office from where he intended to phone the Provincial Governor. As they entered the premises, they were startled by the sound of some weird music coming from somewhere in the distance. Hysterical, anxious and attentive for the slightest sound that might give them a lead, the D.O. stopped the engine immediately, put out his head and listened.

"Yes, there was something happening somewhere. He asked Father Preston to listen too by putting his head out. He did and then jumped down and tried to look in the direction of the sound. It was already getting dark. As soon as he turned his head to look over the Land Rover he saw something in the distance which made him afraid. Against the evening sky was a bright fire. He looked in and beckoned to the D.O. to come down and see.

None of them could tell what the fire indicated. Considering the problems they had on their mind, they imagined that it could only be there for some sinister

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purpose. The D.O. looked across to the direction of the fire again. He had gone hunting once to twice up some of those ranges, but he did not remember ever going as far as the one on whose summit the fire was blazing now. They stood there watching and listening, speechless and motionless, still it raged on, the tempo of the music rising too. The drums were now harsh, the rhythm pulsating and frightening.

"They are at it again," Father Preston exclaimed and then urged the D.O. to go straight into the office and phone as he intended.

Father Preston had read some literature about Biongong country as a whole, before he came to Africa. In fact, he still retained a copy of Bloferd's paperback edition of *Biongong: A Vanishing Supremacy,* which had been given to him in Britain. Biongong was one of those groups which had most bitterly resisted the coming of the white man, it was in that country that the white man was first discovered to have red blood. It was thus the first area where a white man was murdered, and Bloferd's books seems to have been coloured with a feeling of repulsion. Although, ostensibly, the story of the decline and fall of an ancient powerful empire, Bloferd treated the traditions, cultural values and numerous pagan rituals, with a peculiar eye for details which removed it from the realm of an ethnological or sociological tract. It sounds more like a severe warning to all explorers, missionaries, and administrators coming into the area, about the mentality of the people they were likely to meet. It was of no consequence that the book was written several generations ago, and that during the intervening years much had taken place to change the people's way of life.

In his own copy Father Preston had carefully underlined phrases and whole sections which he thought could be helpful to him in having a complete working knowledge of the people.

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He had been with them for long and had forced himself to come to the conclusion that they do not move forward towards enlightenment; that their way of life rotates like a wheel on an axis. Thus, once in every hundred years, the wheel goes right round, bringing them, after generations of abortive efforts to civilize them, back to where they started off. This was the line of thought that prompted him to declare that the people were "at it again."

That was the sound of the music of the land, and it communicated itself in a thousand strange ways. To every single person who listened to it, it had a message, depending on what the listener was thinking about, depending on his frame of mind, depending on where he came from, depending on his age, depending on his sex!

"You want to know what this land has done for you. What have you done to leave it a better place than you met it? If darkness has entombed the face of the earth, light the flame. Do not sit there cursing the darkness. No. The battle for survival must be fought and won - only by you. " To the old men it seemed to say:

"You have already run the race, far enough, even if you cannot go any further. But you have left the race in the wrong hands."

To the women it was thought to say: "Wash, wash quickly the male side of you wombs. Open your legs and be ready to give births. This land needs men, brand new men, men who love their tribe dearly."

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When the D.O. entered his office he picked up the phone and dropped it again. He pressed a button on his table and waited. A policeman came in.

"Go straight to my house with my driver and ask my wife to let the officer there off. Then tell the officer to come with you back to the palace and find out whether the Chief is now there with your comrades. Look for them, if you do not find them there, go up that hill where you see that fire. Take rifles along with you and find out what is happening there. If you find the Chief and there is the slightest disorder, bring him back here. I shall install him myself. Go. Take the dog with you for the search. Go.

The officer clicked his heels and marched out to execute the orders of his master. There was now only one officer left at his disposal. He was corporal Edem, an old man of nearly sixty who had been expecting to go on retirement for the past ten years. With both hands trembling, the D.O. dialled 07-95-69. That was the direct line to the Provincial Governor's house. It will cost him much to betray himself, but he felt obliged to do it. Philosophers say that getting to know a people during a crisis is the best time to know them. The D.O. was to learn that it was also the worst time to know them.

Over the hundreds of miles of trackless jungle, the telephone rang and rang. There was no answer. He thanked God and rose as if to excuse himself that he had at least done his duty. A wave of premonitory fears swept over him, and his mind passed from one state of mental chaos to another in rapid succession. He thought of his wife, he

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thought of his children in Small Monje. He did not know why he thought of them so urgently at that moment, but the thought stuck stubbornly to his mind. He thought of the Chief and the Elders and the officers. What could have happened to them? He went back in and walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver, praying for some odd reason that the Governor should still not be in to answer it.

As he had wished, there was nobody to answer the call when it rang again. His heart was now thumping without any intervals between the thuds. He walked to the window and pulled the curtain to one side so as to be able to see the fire from the table where he sat to telephone. Corporal Edem brought in the lighted Tilley lamp. Then he picked up the receiver for the third time and decided he would keep ringing until somebody answered him. Just at the next ring somebody picked up the phone from the Tetseale end of the line. It took him so completely unawares that he hesitated for sometime before saying a word.

"Heloooo", the unknown voice bellowed. The D.O. wiped his mouth and stammered back:

"He-he-hello." He paused for some time and then asked: "Can I speak to the Provincial Governor please? To his Excellency," he corrected himself.

"Can you speak to who?" the Governor asked. "You are who?" He had just returned from one of his very boring ceremonies - his company commander had been transferred, and he had been at the handing over ceremony the whole day. He felt very tired indeed, and was not in the best mood for anything which did not suggest rest.

"I, Martin Ezeatebong, his Excellency," the D.O. recognized the Governor's voice. "The District Officer of Small Monje, here in the Middle Belt." The words dropped from his mouth with ridiculous precision.

"Speaking," The Governor groaned from the other end. The line went dead for one whole minute before the D.O. could reassemble his thoughts into anything meaningful.

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"I have a small problem here, sir." The D.O. paused before adding: "With these people." He looked out of the window. The fire had suddenly gone out. The music too could no longer be heard. He blew his nose over the edge of the table and used the back of his left hand to clean it. Hi mind had suddenly slid back into fits of agitation. He found it hard to speak until the Governor called again: "Hello, please."

"Hello, sir," he answered as if waking from a dream.

"What is this small problem?" he asked dizzily. He thought it might be a request for financial assistance.

"They have kidnapped..." he began.

"They who?"

"The people, Excellency. The people here. The natives."

"What do you say they have done?" he asked with immediate concern. "And by the way, Martin, did you receive the statue safely? Your men were at the Ministry of Antiquities the other day."

"I,I,I, have, sir. I saw it. It is in the palace now."

"So what were you telling me about the natives?"

"His Excellency, they have kidnapped their Chief together with some Elders and..."

He stopped talking and turned away from the receiver without asking for an excuse. The officer he had sent had just come in, panting, to deliver the grisly news of the latest developments. He told the D.O. from the door that their comrade had just arrived, mortally wounded, to say that the Chief and the five Elders who had been living in his house had been savagely murdered up in the hills, together with two of the officers who were with them. He said it was done by a gang under the leadership of Ngangabe and Ngobefuo, and that there were mad people all over the place.

"Excuse me, sir," the D.O. called to introduce the officer with the disturbing news. "This officer has just come in from the village. He has seen everything that has happened. It is above my comprehension."

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"Where is he, please?" The Governor could still not tell what he was trying to report to him. The D.O. pulled the officer violently by the collar of his shirt and, showing him the telephone asked him to report exactly what had happened. Very breathlessly the man began. In the middle of the confused report the Governor stopped him and asked:

"Why all the killing? Why?"

The officer told the D.O. what the Governor had asked. The D.O. seized the receiver from him and pulled himself to one side of the table to try to manufacture what he felt could serve as an explanation. Just then he sighted Father Preston run across the compound, stop at the window of his office and warn him:

"Martin, run for your life! There is madness everywhere!" Then the D.O. saw him run into the bush. There was a gun shot outside, a scream and then the trampling of a thousand feet at the entrance of his office. Hell had broken loose! And before him, charging into the office, he could see all the devils he had ever known in the tribe.

"Shoot and kill them all" he ordered the officer, trying to take cover behind his book shelf. Before he even finished giving his orders the man had whipped out his revolver from his belt and unleashed the whole round of six cartridges, killing that number of invaders. They pressed on, with every available weapon - spears, cutlasses, pick-axes, stones, clubs, hatchets and even hoes.

The space between the hook shelf and the wall was too narrow to admit the bulk of the D.O. He could not even lift himself up and over the window as his body-guard had done when he ran out of cartridges. In the midst of all the turmoil he found himself rubbing his back against the wall, holding up both hands like a child, as an act of surrender, sliding down and crying:

"The government sent me here! The government sent me here." That only enraged the mob all the more. Inflamed

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by a seething fire of revenge against every conceivable grievance which the D.O. then epitomized, they fell on him, even wounding themselves, as every single person tried to use his weapon on the villain before he died. And even after he had died, those like Ngangabe who came too late, still managed to find some unpierced spot under him for their own machete. Then as the others proceeded to the Mission, he pulled the D.O.'s corpse to the doorsteps and, leaning its head outside, crushed its mouth open with his club. He then took a handful of dust and pouring it into the bleeding shattered mouth said:

"That is the land you said you wanted to eat. Eat it now."

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The Provincial Governor was still holding the receiver of the phone in his hands. Although he had not been told anything reasonable about what was happening, he immediately sensed danger and commotion. He heard the shots echo through the receiver when it fell from the D.O.'s hands, the moment the talk was interrupted. Then he heard the people screaming and shouting. He replaced the receiver, thought for a while and then rang up Captain Abongo, the new company commander.

"You have taken up responsibilities at a very unfortunate moment captain," he began.

The man was silent.

"Anything wrong sir?" he asked.

"There is something seriously wrong in Small Monje. I don't know the extent of it, but I was just speaking with the District Officer there when some confusion broke out and cut the line. There is most likely a civilian uprising there against the government. It sounds serious."

There was silence.

"I am listening, Your Excellency," the captain said.

"Yes. Dispatch a reasonable number of soldiers there to bring back peace - at any cost. Your men should go there armed, very armed, for any eventually. I am sending a radio message to the effect that a state of emergency has been declared and a curfew imposed in that district. It will be made known that it would be very unsafe for anybody not of the military to enter or leave the place. Captain, this is your first task."

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Captain Abongo dropped the line and went straight to the army head quarters. There he explained the matter to Lieutenant Iveng. A whole unit was placed at his disposal for the subjugation of Nkokonoko Small Monje.

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Back in the village that night Ngobefuo was addressing his kinsmen. He continued to speak of their determination to protect their land, their tradition, but he spoke with failing enthusiasm.

"We heard that Goment was taken when he was sending a wire to the big goment in Tetseale. What he told them, we do not know. But when the people of Kwiniche once burnt the motor of their goment, and cut the bridge, their Chief was taken away and put into prison, and he died there. We have killed Goment's people. We have killed Father. We have killed Goment himself. And we have burnt their houses all down. And we have killed our Chief. If the big goment is sending people, who are they coming to take?"

"Us," Ndenwontio said.

"Yes, us." Ngobefuo said silently. He paused for some time and then said: "We might have slipped on a banana peeling somewhere along our road. If the big goment is coming to take us from here, he will be told that it was not our fault that he left so many dried leaves lying so close to the fire of Nkokonoko Small Monje. We needed our god and our land, they took all from us, fooling our Chief."

"And, my first man, I am not cutting you short," Ndenwontio rose. "I just want to tell our people that we are not ready for war against goment."

"We are ready for war against anybody," Ngangabe vociferated with clenched fists, holding up to everybody's view, and to the young men's delight, the Reverend Father's cassock and the police officer's khaki shirt which he had torn off their dead bodies. "Leave it to us who can still fight."

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"Not like that," Ngobefuo cautioned him. "Listen to your father talking to you."

There was quiet.

"We are not ready for any war against goment," Ndenwontio repeated. "We were only trying to make the goment know that there were very many things which annoyed us. We did not steal this land, so we could not let it go without a struggle. They took our land, insulted us, and turned our god into an object of trade, but we are not ready for any war against goment."

"But if it comes to it?" Ngangabe queried.

"Even if it comes to it," Ndenwontio repeated. "What have we got? No guns. Nothing."

"But those who gave us this land have not forgotten us," Ngangabe actually seized the floor. "If the old men can see no longer, let us tell them that the roads from Tetseale to here still pass through the valleys. Let me tell them that we can still scale mountains. And that we have men ready here now, not less than one hundred, who can still roll down such stones from the top of our hills which once made us a free people."

When he stopped talking, a team of enthusiastic young men rushed and carried him shoulder high to his corner. Everybody was clapping. They were not clapping just to applaud any sense in what he had said. It was just their own way of easing the tension, the atmosphere of nervous apprehension of a major catastrophe that was beginning to build up in them. Ngobefuo looked at Ndenwontio, and the man too looked at him. The two looked at the wounded Ajem-abeule, and the three looking at one another shrugged their shoulders helplessly. It was only a matter of time, they thought!

The End

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Linus Asong was born in the South West Region of Cameroon in 1947. Asong is a stand-up humorist, a consummate portrait painter, an accomplished literary scholar, and a celebrated prolific writer with over a dozen novels to his credit.

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